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SWAMP ISLAND

by MILDRED A. WIRT

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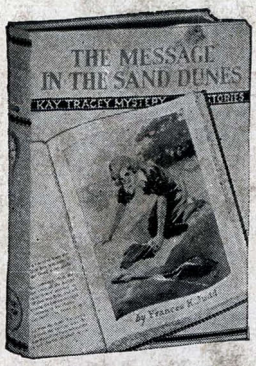

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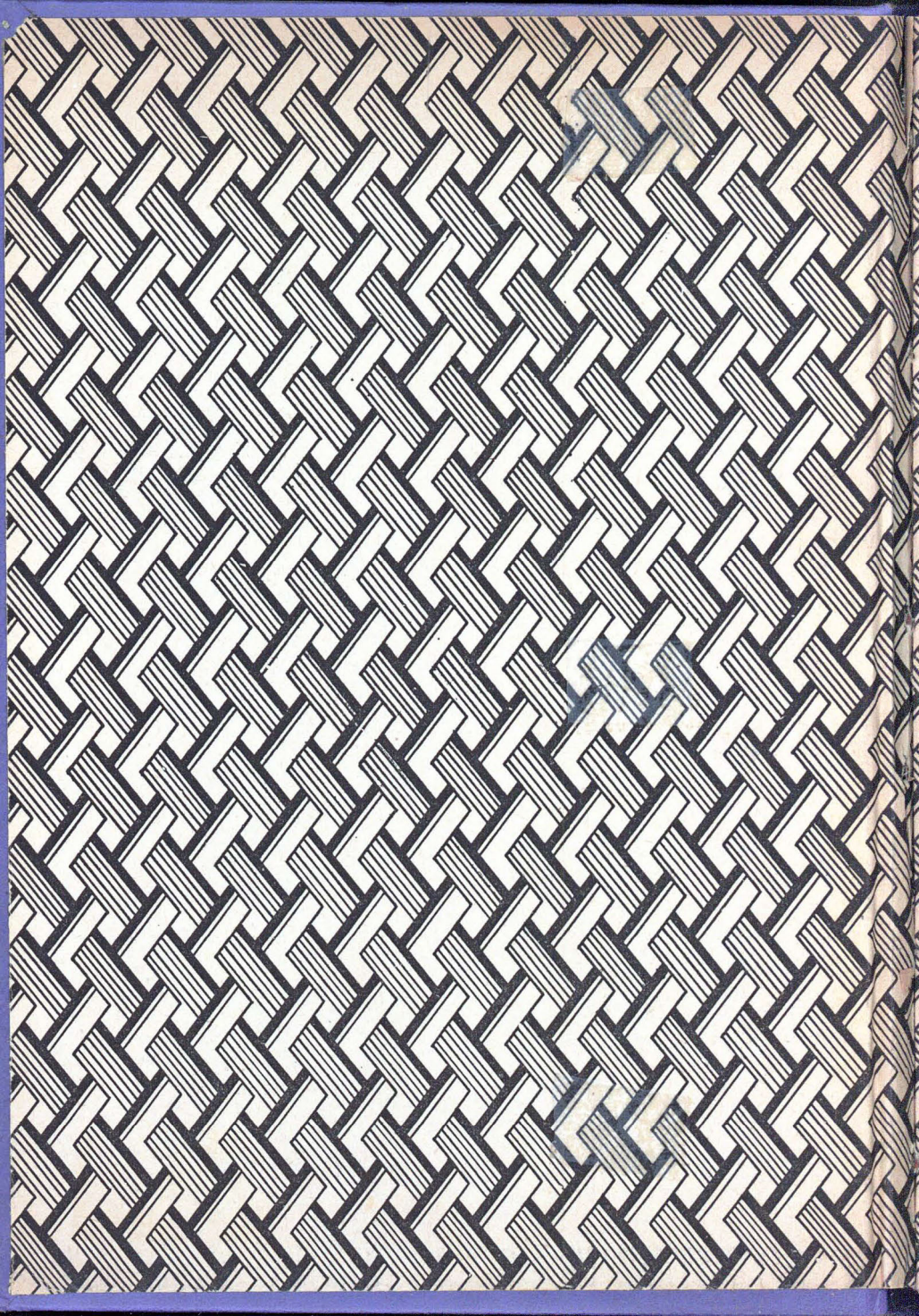

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The boar had turned and was coming for her again.

"Swamp Island" (See Page 127)

Swamp Island

By

MILDRED A. WIRT

Author of

MILDRED A. WIRT MYSTERY STORIES

PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES

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Illustrated

CUPPLES AND LEON COMPANY

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PENNY PARKER

MYSTERY STORIES

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WHISPERING WALLS
SWAMP ISLAND

Other Titles in Preparation

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Swamp Island

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CHAPTER

1

THE BEARDED STRANGER

WITH SLOW, smooth strokes, Penny Parker sent the flat-bottomed skiff cutting through the still, sluggish water toward a small point of wooded land near the swamp's edge.

In the bottom of the boat, her dark-haired companion, Louise Sidell, sat with her hand resting carelessly on the collar of her dog, Bones, who drowsed beside her. The girl yawned and shifted cramped limbs.

"Let's go home, Penny," she pleaded. "We have all the flowers you'll need to decorate the banquet tables tonight."

"But not all I want," Penny corrected with a grin. "See those beautiful Cherokee roses growing over there on the island point? They're nicer than anything we have."

"Also harder to get."

Louise craned her neck to gaze at the wild, tangled

growth which rose densely from the water's edge.

"Remember," she admonished, "when Trapper Joe rented us this boat his last words were: 'Don't go far, and stay in the skiff.' "

"After we gather the flowers, we'll start straight home, Lou. We're too near the edge of the swamp to lose our way."

Disregarding Louise's frown, Penny tossed a lock of auburn hair out of her eyes, and dug in again with the oars.

A giant crane, disturbed by the splash, flapped up from the tall water grass. As he trumpeted angrily, Bones stirred and scrambled to his feet.

"Quiet, Bones!" Louise ordered, giving him a reassuring pat. "It's only a saucy old crane."

The dog stretched out on the decking again, but through half-closed eyes watched the bird in flight.

"Lou, hasn't it been fun, coming here today?" Penny demanded in a sudden outbreak of enthusiasm. "I've loved every minute of it!"

"You certainly have! But it's getting late and we're both hot and tired. If you must have those flowers, let's get them quickly and start home."

The two girls, students at Riverview high school, had rented the skiff early that afternoon from Trapper Joe Scoville, a swamper who lived alone in a shack at the swamp's edge.

For three hours now, they had idled along the en-

trance channel, gathering water lilies, late-blooming Cherokee roses, yellow jessamine, and iris.

The excursion had been entirely Penny's idea. That night in a Riverview hotel, her father, Anthony Parker, publisher of the *Riverview Star*, was acting as host to a state newspapermen's convention. He had handed Penny twenty dollars, with instructions to buy flowers for the banquet tables.

Penny, with her usual flare for doing things differently, had decided to save the money by gathering swamp blooms.

"These flowers are nicer than anything we could have bought from a florist," she declared, gazing appreciatively at the mass of blooms which dripped water in the basket at her feet.

"And think what you can do with twenty dollars!" her chum teased.

"Seventeen. Remember, we owe Trapper Joe three dollars for boat rental."

"It will be four if we don't call it a day. Let's get the flowers, if we must, and start home."

"Fair enough," Penny agreed.

Squinting at the lowering sun, she guided the skiff to a point of the low-lying island. There she held it steady while her chum stepped out on the spongy ground.

Bones, eager to explore, leaped after her and was off in a flash before Louise could seize his collar.

Penny followed her chum ashore, beaching her skiff in a clump of water plants. "This place looks like a natural haunt for cottonmouths or moccasins," she remarked. "We'll have to watch out for snakes."

Already Louise was edging along in the soft muck, alertly keeping an eye upon all overhead limbs from which a poisonous reptile might drop.

Annoyed by thorny bushes which teethed into her jacket, she turned to protest to Penny that the roses were not worth the trouble it would take to gather them.

But the words never were spoken.

For just then, from some distance inland, came the sound of men's voices. Louise listened a moment and retreated toward the boat.

"Someone is here on the island," she whispered nervously. "Let's leave!"

All afternoon the girls had floated through the outer reaches of the swamp without seeing a single human being. Now to hear voices in this isolated area was slightly unnerving even to Penny. But she was not one to turn tail and run without good reason.

"Why should we leave?" she countered, careful to keep her voice low. "We have a perfect right to be here. They're probably fishermen from Riverview."

Louise was not so easily reassured.

"We have all the flowers you need, Penny. Please, let's go!"

"You wait for me in the boat, Lou. I'll slip over to the bank and get the roses. Only take a minute."

Stepping carefully across a half-decayed log, Penny started toward the roses, visible on a bank farther up shore.

Bones trotted a few feet ahead of her, his sensitive nose to the ground.

"Go back, Bones," Penny ordered softly. "Stay with Louise!"

Bones did not obey. As Penny overtook him and seized the trailing leash, she suddenly heard voices again.

Two men were talking several yards away, completely hidden by the bushes. Their words brought her up short.

"There hain't no reason to be afeared if we use our heads," the one was saying. "Maybe me and the boys will help if ye make it worth our while, but we hain't aimin' to tangle with no law."

The voice of the man who answered was low and husky.

"You'll help me all right, or I'll tell what I know! Only one thing brought me back here. I aim to get the guy who put me up! I was in town last night but didn't get sight of him. I'm going back soon's I leave here."

Penny had been listening so intently that she completely forgot Bones.

The dog tugged hard at the leash which slipped from the girl's hand. She scrambled for it, only to have Bones elude her and dart into the underbrush.

From the boat, Louise saw her pet escaping. Fearful that he would be lost, she called shrilly:

"Bones! Bones! Come back here!"

The dog paid no heed. But Louise's cry had carried far and served to warn those inland that someone had landed on the point.

A moment of dead silence ensued. Then Penny heard one of the men demand sharply: "What was that?"

Waiting for no more, she backtracked toward the boat. Before she could reach it, the bushes behind her parted.

A tall, square-shouldered man whose jaw was covered with a jungle growth of red beard, peered out at her. He wore a wide-brimmed, floppy, felt hat and loose fitting work clothes with sturdy boots.

His eyes, fierce and hostile, fastened directly upon Penny.

"Git!" he said harshly.

Penny retreated a step, then held her ground.

"Please, sir, our dog is lost in the underbrush," she began. "We can't leave without him—"

"Git!" the man repeated. As he started toward her, Penny saw that he carried a gun in the crook of his arm.

CHAPTER

2

ALERTING ALL CARS

PENNY WAS no coward; neither was she foolhardy.

A second look at the bearded stranger, and her mind telegraphed the warning: "This man means business! Better play along."

The man fingered his gun. "Git goin' now!" he ordered sharply. "And don't come back!"

In the boat, Louise already had reached nervously for the oars. She wet her fingers and whistled for Bones, but the dog, off on a fascinating scent, had been completely swallowed up by the rank undergrowth.

"Ye heard me?" the stranger demanded. "I be a patient man, but I hain't speakin' agin."

Penny hesitated, half tempted to defy the swamper.

"Let Bones go," Louise called. "Come on."

Thus urged, Penny backed toward the skiff. Stumbling over a vine, she caught her balance and scrambled awkwardly into the boat.

Louise pushed off with the oars, stroking fast until they were well out into the channel. Only then did she give vent to anger.

"That mean man! Now we've lost Bones for good. We'll never get him back."

"Maybe we will."

"How? We'll never dare row back there today. He's still watching us."

Penny nodded, knowing that anything she might say would carry clearly over the water.

The stranger had not moved since the skiff had pulled away. Like a grim statue, he stood in the shadow of a towering oak, gazing straight before him.

"Who does he think he is anyhow?" Louise demanded, becoming bolder as they put greater distance between themselves and the island. "Does he own this swamp?"

"He seems to think he does—or at least this section of it. Don't feel too badly about Bones, Lou. We'll come back tomorrow and find him."

"Tomorrow may be too late. He'll be hopelessly lost, or maybe that man will shoot him! Oh, Penny, Bones was such a cute little dog. He always brought me the morning paper, and he knew so many clever tricks."

"It was all my fault for insisting upon landing there. Lou, I feel awful."

"You needn't."

Louise forced herself into a cheerful tone. "Maybe we'll find him again or he'll come home. If not—well—" her voice broke.

Both girls fell into a gloomy silence. Water swished gently against the skiff as Louise sent it forward with vicious stabs of the oars.

With growing distaste, Penny eyed the mass of flowers in the bottom of the boat. Already the blooms were wilting.

"I wish we never had come to the swamp today, Lou. It was a bum idea."

"No, we had a good time until we met that man. Please, Penny, it wasn't your fault."

Penny drew up her knees for a chin rest and gloomily watched her chum row. A big fish broke the surface of the still water. Across the channel, the sun had become a low-hanging, fiery-red disc. But Penny focused her eyes on the receding island.

"Lou," she said, "there were two men on the point. Did you hear what they were saying?"

"No, only a murmur of voices."

Her curiosity aroused, Louise waited patiently for more information. Penny plucked at a floating hyacinth plant and then added:

"I can't quite dope it out, Lou. One of those men seemed to be asking the other to hide him, and there was talk of evading the law—also a threat to 'get' someone."

"Us probably."

"No, until you called Bones, they apparently didn't know anyone was around. Who could those men be?"

"Crooks, I'll bet," Louise said grimly. "Thank goodness, we're almost out of the swamp now. I can see the clearing ahead and a little tumbledown house and barn."

"Not Trapper Joe's place?" Penny asked, straightening up to look.

The skiff had swung into faster water.

"We're not that far yet," Louise replied as she rested on the oars a moment. "Don't you remember —it's a house we passed just after we rented the boat."

"So it is. My mind is only hitting on half its cylinders today. Anyway, we're out of the swamp. Let's pull up and ask for a drink of cool water."

With a sigh of relief, Louise guided the skiff to a sagging, make-shift dock close to the farmhouse.

Some distance back from the river, enclosed by a broken fence, stood an unpainted, two-story frame house.

Beyond the woodshed rose a barn, its roof shingles badly curled. At the pump near the house, a middle-aged woman in loose-fitting faded blue dress, vigorously scrubbed a copper wash boiler.

She straightened quickly as the skiff grated against the dock.

"Howdy," she greeted the girls at their approach. Her tone lacked cordiality.

"Good afternoon," said Penny. "May we have a drink at the pump?"

"Help yourself."

The woman jerked a gnarled hand toward a gourd cup attached to the pump with a string. She studied the girls intently, almost suspiciously.

Louise and Penny drank only a few sips, for the water was warm and of unpleasant taste.

"You'uns be strangers hereabouts," the woman observed.

"Yes, we come from Riverview," Penny replied.

"You hain't been in the swamp?"

"Why, yes," answered Louise, eager to relate details of their adventure. "We gathered flowers, and then met a horrid man with red whiskers! He drove us away from the island before I could get my dog."

The woman gazed at the girls in an odd way.

"Sarved you'uns right to be driv off," she said in a grim voice. "The swamp's no place fer young gals. You might o' been et by a beast or bit by a snake."

"I don't believe the man we saw was much worried about that," Penny said dryly. "I wonder who he was?"

The farm woman shrugged and began to scour the copper boiler again. After a moment she looked up, fixing Penny with a stern and unfriendly eye.

"Let me give you a pocketful o' advice," she said. "Don't fret that purty head o' yourn about the swamp. And don't go pokin' yer nose into what ain't none o' your consarn. If I was you, I wouldn't come back. These here parts ain't none too health fer strangers, even young 'uns."

"But I want my dog," Louise insisted. "He's lost on the island."

"Hain't likely you'll ever see that dawg agin. And if you know what's good 'n smart, you'uns won't go back there agin."

Having delivered herself of this advice, the woman turned her back and went on with her work. Made increasingly aware of her hostility, Penny and Louise said goodbye and returned to the skiff.

As they shoved off, they could see that the woman was watching them.

"We're certainly popular today," Penny remarked when the skiff had floated on toward Trapper Joe's rental dock. "My, was she a sour pickle!"

Ten minutes later, as the girls brought up at Trapper Joe's place, they saw the lean old swamper standing near the dock, skinning a rabbit. His leathery, weather-beaten face crinkled into smiles.

"Sure am glad yer back safe an sound," he greeted them cheerfully. "After I let you take the skiff I got to worryin' fer fear you'd go too fur and git lost. 'Pears like you had good sense after all."

"The only thing we lost was my dog," Louise declared, stepping out on the dock. "Bones is gone for good, I guess."

She quickly told the old trapper what had happened on the island. He listened attentively, making no comment until she had finished.

" 'Pears like you must have run afoul of Ezekiel Hawkins," he said then. "Leastwise, he's the only one hereabouts with a grizzly red beard."

"Is he a crook or a fugitive from the law?" Penny demanded.

"Not that nobody ever heard of. Ezekiel and his two boys, Hod and Coon, tend purty much to their own business. But they don't go fer strangers hangin' around."

"And do they own the island?"

"Not an inch of it—all that swamp's government land. Can't figure why, if 'twas Ezekiel, he'd drive you away from there. Unless—"

"Unless what?" Penny asked as the trapper fell silent.

"Jest a'thinkin'. Well, I'll keep an eye out fer the dog and maybe have a talk with Ezekiel."

Penny and Louise thanked the swamper and paid him for use of the boat. Gathering up the flowers they had picked, they started toward the road where they had parked Penny's coupe.

The trapper walked with them to the front gate.

"By the way," Penny remarked, "who is the woman on the farm just above here?"

"At the edge of the swamp? That's the Ezekiel Hawkins' place."

"Not the farm of that bearded man we met today!"

"Reckon so."

"We stopped there for a drink and talked to a tall, dark-haired woman. She was rather short with us."

"That would be Manthy, Ezekiel's wife. She's sharp-tongued, Manthy is, and not too friendly. Works hard slavin' and cookin' fer them two no-good boys of hers."

Penny and Louise asked no more questions, but again saying goodbye to Trapper Joe, went on down the dusty road.

Once they were beyond earshot, Penny observed: "What a joke on us, Lou! There we were, complaining to Mrs. Hawkins about her own husband! No wonder she was short with us."

"We had good reason to complain."

"Yes we did," Penny soberly agreed. "Of course, we can't be dead certain the bearded man was Ezekiel Hawkins. But Manthy did act unpleasant about it."

"If it weren't for Bones, I'd never set foot near this place again! Oh, I hope he finds his way home."

The girls had reached Penny's car, parked just off the sideroad. A clock on the dashboard warned them it was after five o'clock.

"Jeepers!" Penny exclaimed, snapping on the ignition. "I'll have to step on it to get dressed in time for the banquet! And I still have the tables to decorate!"

A fast drive over the bumpy sideroad brought the girls to the main paved highway. Much later, as they neared Riverview, Penny absently switched on the shortwave radio.

A number of routine police calls came through. Then the girls were startled to hear the dispatcher at headquarters say:

"Attention all scout cars! Be on the alert for escaped convict, Danny Deevers alias Spike Devons. Five-feet nine, blue eyes, brown hair. Last seen in state prison uniform. Believed heading for Riverview."

"Danny Deevers!" Penny whispered, and quickly turned the volume control. "I repeat," boomed the dispatcher's voice. "Be on lookout for Danny Deevers, a dangerous escaped criminal. Believed heading this way."

CHAPTER

3

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

"DID YOU hear that?" Penny demanded of her chum as the police dispatcher went off the air. "Danny Deevers has escaped!"

The name rang no bell in Louise's memory.

"And who is Danny Deevers?" she inquired. "Anyone you know?"

"Not exactly. But Jerry Livingston has good reason to remember him."

"Jerry Livingston? That reporter you like so well?"

A quick grin brought confession from Penny. "Jerry is only one of my friends," she said. "But it's a known fact he's better looking and smarter than all the other *Star* reporters put together."

"It's a fact known to *you*," teased her chum. "Well, what about this escaped convict, Danny Deevers?"

Penny stopped for a red light. As it changed to green she replied:

"Don't you recall a series of stories Jerry wrote in our paper nearly a year ago? They exposed shortages which developed at the Third Federal Loan Bank. Jerry dug up a lot of evidence, and the result was, thefts were pinned on Danny Deevers. He was convicted and sent to the penitentiary for twenty years."

"Oh, yes, now I remember."

"At the time of his conviction, Deevers threatened if ever he went free, he would get even with Jerry."

"And now he's on the loose!"

"Not only that, but heading for Riverview, according to the police."

"You don't think he'd dare try to carry out his threat?"

Penny frowned and swerved to avoid hitting a cat which scuttled across the highway.

"Who knows, Lou? The police evidently are hot on Deevers' trail, but if they don't get him, he may try to seek revenge. It's odd he turns up today—and those men talking in the swamp—"

Louise's eyes opened wide. "Penny, you don't think Danny Deevers could have taken refuge in the swamp!"

"It's possible. Wouldn't it be a good hideout?"

"Only for a very courageous person," Louise shivered. "At night, all sorts of wild animals must prowl

about. And one easily could be bitten by a poisonous snake and could die before help came."

"I'm not saying Danny Deevers was on the island today, Lou. But it's a thought. Maybe I'll pass it on to the police."

Penny fell into thoughtful silence as she reflected upon the strange snatch of conversation she had overheard between the two men in the underbrush. Had the bearded stranger really been Ezekiel Hawkins, and if so, with whom had he talked? The chance that the second man might have been Danny Deevers seemed slim, but it was a possibility.

When the car finally reached Riverview, Penny dropped Louise at the Sidell home and drove on to her own residence.

As she entered her own house, Mrs. Weems, the Parker family housekeeper, met the girl in the living room archway.

"Oh, Penny, where have you been!" she exclaimed. "Your father has telephoned twice. He's waiting for you now at the newspaper office."

"Do telephone him I'm practically on my way," Penny pleaded. "I'll grab a bath, dress, and be out of here in two shakes."

Midway up the stairs, the girl already had stripped off her sports shirt.

"I'll call your father," Mrs. Weems agreed, "but please, after this, pay more heed to time. You know

how much the success of tonight's newspaper convention means to your father."

Penny's mumbled reply was blotted out by the slam of the bathroom door. The shower began to run full blast.

With a sigh, Mrs. Weems went to telephone Mr. Parker at the *Riverview Star* office.

For several years now, the housekeeper had efficiently supervised the motherless Parker home. She loved Penny, an only child, as her own, but there were times when she felt the girl was allowed too much freedom by an indulgent father.

Penny's active, alert mind was a never-ending source of amazement to Mrs. Weems. She had not entirely approved when Mr. Parker allowed the girl to spend her summers working as a reporter on the newspaper he owned.

Nevertheless, the housekeeper had been very proud because Penny had proved her ability. Not only had the girl written many fine stories which brought recognition, but also she had demonstrated a true "nose for news."

One of Penny's first lessons learned on the *Star* was that a deadline must always be met. Knowing now that she dared not be late, she hurriedly brushed her hair and wriggled into a long, full-skirted evening dress.

Almost before Mrs. Weems had completed the tele-

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phone call, she was downstairs again searching frantically for a beaded bag and gloves.

"Here they are, on the table," the housekeeper said. "Your father said he would wait just fifteen minutes."

"That's all I need, if the lights are green," Penny flung over her shoulder, as she ran to the parked car. "See you later, Mrs. Weems!"

Leaving an exhausted housekeeper behind, the girl made a quick trip to the downtown newspaper office.

As she reached the building, newsboys were on the streets crying the first edition, just off the press.

Upstairs, in the newsroom, reporters were relaxing at their desks, taking a few minutes' "breather" between editions.

Swinging through the entrance gate, Penny created a slight stir. At one of the desks under a neon light, Jerry Livingston, pencil behind one ear and hair slightly rumpled, tapped aimlessly at the keys of a typewriter. His quick eye appreciatively took in the long flowing skirt and the high heeled slippers.

"Well, if it isn't our little glamor girl!" he teased. "Cinderella ready for the ball!"

At another time, Penny would have paused to chat. Now she flashed a quick smile and clicked on toward the city desk.

Editor DeWitt, a quick-tempered, paunchy man of middle-age stood talking to her father, who looked more than ever distinguished in a new gray suit.

"Here she comes now," Mr. DeWitt said as Penny approached. "Your daughter never missed a deadline yet, Mr. Parker."

"Perhaps not," the publisher admitted, "but it always gives me heart failure, figuring she will."

"Dad, I'm sorry to have annoyed you," Penny said quickly before he could get in another word. "I was out at the swamp with Louise."

"The swamp!"

"Gathering flowers for the banquet table," Penny added hastily. "Oh, Dad, they're simply beautiful—so much nicer than any florist could have supplied."

"I can imagine." Mr. Parker smiled and looked at the wall clock. "We're due at the theater in ten minutes. I'm chairman of the program, unfortunately."

Penny gently broke the news. "Dad, I haven't had time to decorate the banquet table at the hotel. Will you drive me there?"

"I can't," Mr. Parker said, slightly exasperated. "I'm late now. Have one of the photographers take you. By the way, where's Salt Sommers?"

Hearing his name spoken, a young photographer whose clothes looked as if he had slept in them, moved out from behind a newspaper he had been reading.

"Coming right up, Chief," he answered.

"Run my daughter over to the Hillcrest Hotel," the publisher instructed. "Make it your job to see that she reaches the theater promptly."

"I guess I can handle her," Salt said, winking at Penny.

"And now, where is Jerry?" the publisher asked. "Has anyone seen him?"

"Relax, Dad," said Penny. "He's right here."

"I am jumpy tonight," Mr. Parker admitted, "but I have a lot on my mind. That stunt we've planned for the entertainment of our out-of-town men—is everything set?"

"Sure," DeWitt assured him. "There'll be no hitch. As the mayor winds up his address of welcome, the stage electrician turns off the stage lights. Jerry, in view of the audience, orders him to turn 'em on again. He refuses an' they argue over union rules. The fight gets hotter until finally the workman pulls a revolver and lets him have it full blast. Jerry falls, clutching his chest. Our newsboys gallop down the aisles with copies of the *Riverview Star* and screaming headlines telling all about the big murder. Everyone gets a swell laugh, figuring it's pretty snappy coverage."

"You certainly make it sound corny the way you tell it," Mr. Parker sighed. "Who thought up the idea anyhow?"

"Why, you did, Chief," grinned Salt. Remember?"

"It was a poor idea. Maybe we ought to call it off."

"After we got the extras all printed an' everything?" Mr. DeWitt asked, looking injured. "The boys went to a lot of trouble."

"All right, we'll go ahead just as we planned, but I hope there is no slip-up. How about the revolver?"

"Right here," said Salt, whipping it from an inside pocket. "Loaded with blanks." He pointed it at a neon light, pulled the trigger and a loud bang resulted.

Jerry Livingston sauntered over. "So that's the lethal weapon," he observed. "Can I trust you guys not to slip a real bullet in when I'm not looking?"

"I've got to go," cut in Mr. Parker, looking again at the clock. "The program starts as soon as I get to the theater. Speeches should take about an hour. Then the stunt. And don't be late!"

"We'll be there," Salt promised. "Jerry, you riding with Penny and me?"

"I'll come later in my own car. Have a story to write first."

Going back to his typewriter, the reporter slipped carbons and paper into the machine and began pecking the keys.

At that moment a Western Union boy came through the newsroom. Catching Penny's eye, he pushed a telegram toward her and asked her to sign.

She wrote her name automatically, before noticing that the envelope bore Jerry's name.

"For you," she said, tossing it onto the roller of his typewriter. "More fan mail."

"It's probably a threat to bring suit if I don't pay my dry cleaning bill," Jerry chuckled.

He glanced at the envelope briefly, then slit it up the side. As he read the wire, his face became a study. His jaw tightened. Then he relaxed and laughed.

"This is a threat all right," he commented, "but not from the dry cleaners!"

Jerry reread the telegram, snorted with disgust, and then handed it to Penny.

In amazement she read: "ARRIVED IN TOWN TODAY TO TAKE CARE OF A LITTLE UNFINISHED BUSINESS. WILL BE SEEING YOU."

The telegram bore the signature, Danny Deevers.

CHAPTER

4

A TRAFFIC ACCIDENT

AS WORD spread through the office that Jerry had received a threat from the escaped convict, reporters gathered to read the telegram and comment upon it.

"Great stuff!" exclaimed Editor DeWitt, thinking in terms of headlines. "*Riverview Star* reporter threatened by Danny Deevers! We'll build it up—post a reward for his capture—provide you with a bodyguard."

"But I don't want a bodyguard," Jerry retorted. "Build up the story if you want to, but skip the kindergarten trimmings."

"You ought to have a bodyguard," DeWitt insisted seriously. "Danny Deevers is nobody's playboy. He may mean business. Reporters are hard to get these days. We can't risk having you bumped off."

"Oh, this telegram is pure bluff," Jerry replied, scrambling up the yellow sheet and hurling it into a

tall metal scrap can. "I'll not be nursemaided by any bodyguard, and that's final!"

"Okay," DeWitt gave in, "but if you get bumped off, don't come crying to me!"

Jerry took a long drink at the fountain and then said thoughtfully: "You know, I have a hunch about Danny."

"Spill it," invited DeWitt.

"He didn't come back here to get even with me for those articles I wrote—or at least it's a secondary purpose."

"Then why did he head for Riverview?"

"I have an idea he may have come back to get $50,000."

"The money he stole from the Third Federal Bank?"

"Sure. The money disappeared, and when Danny took the rap, he refused to tell where he had hidden it. I'll bet the money is in a safe place somewhere in Riverview."

"You may be right at that," DeWitt agreed. "Anyway, it's a good story. Better write a couple pages before you go over to the theater—let that other stuff go."

Jerry nodded and with a quick glance at the clock, sat down at his typewriter.

"Ready, Penny?" called Salt, picking up his camera and heading for the door.

"In a minute."

Penny hesitated and then walked over to Jerry's desk.

"Jerry, you'll be careful, won't you?" she asked anxiously.

"Oh, sure," he agreed. "If I see Danny first, I'll start running."

"Do be serious, Jerry! You know, there's a chance Danny may be hiding in the swamp."

The carriage of Jerry's typewriter stopped with a jerk. He now gave Penny his full attention.

"What's that about Danny being in the swamp?"

"I didn't say he is for sure, but today when Louise and I were out there, we heard a very strange conversation."

Penny swiftly related everything that had occurred on the tiny island near the swamp entrance. She also described the bearded stranger who had ordered her away.

"That couldn't have been Danny," Jerry decided. "Not unless he's disguised his appearance."

"There was another man," Penny reminded him. "Louise and I never saw his face."

"Well, the swamp angle is worth investigating," the reporter assured her. "Personally, I doubt Danny would ever try living in the swamp—he's a city, slum-bred man—but I'll tell the police about it."

"Do be careful," Penny urged again, turning away.

Salt was waiting in the press car when she reached the street. Quickly transferring the flowers from her own automobile to his, she climbed in beside him.

"The Hillcrest?" he inquired, shifting gears.

"Yes, I'll decorate the tables. Then we'll drive to the theater."

With a complete disregard for speed laws, safety stops, and red lights, Salt toured the ten blocks to the hotel in record time. Pulling up at the entrance, he said:

"While you're in there, I'll amble across the street. Want to do a little inquiring at the Western Union office."

"About the telegram Danny Deevers sent Jerry?"

"Figured we might find from where it was sent."

"I should have thought of that myself! Do see what you can learn, Salt. It won't take me long to fix those tables."

Penny disappeared into the hotel but was back in fifteen minutes. A moment later, Salt sauntered across the street from the Western Union office.

"Learn anything?" Penny asked.

"A little. The manager told me a boy picked up the message from a rooming house on Clayton street. That's all they know about it."

"Did you get the address?"

"Sure—1497 Clayton Street—an apartment build-

ing. The clue may be a dud one though. Danny wouldn't likely be dumb enough to leave a wide open trail."

"All the same, oughtn't we to check into it?"

"We?"

"Naturally I'm included," grinned Penny. "By the way, aren't we near Clayton street now?"

"It's only a couple of blocks away."

"Then what's delaying us?"

"My conscience for one thing," Salt said, climbing into the car beside Penny. "Your father's expecting us at the theater. I'm supposed to take pictures of the visiting big-boys."

"We'll get there in time. This may be our only chance to trace Danny."

"You're a glutton for adventure," Salt said dubiously, studying his wristwatch. "Me—I'm not so sure."

"Danny probably won't be hiding out at the rooming house," Penny argued. "But someone may be able to tell us where he went."

"Okay," the photographer agreed, jamming his foot on the starter. "We got to make it snappy though."

The dingy old brick apartment house at 1497 Clayton Street stood jammed against other low-rent buildings in the downtown business section.

"You wait here," Salt advised as he pulled up near

the dwelling. "If I don't come back in ten minutes, put in a call to the police. And arrange to give me a decent burial!"

The photographer disappeared into the building.

He was back almost at once. "It was a dud," he said in disgust. "The telegram was sent from here all right, but Danny's skipped."

"You talked to the building manager?"

Salt nodded. "A fellow that must have been Danny rented a room last night, but he pulled out early this morning."

"Why, the telegram didn't come until a few minutes ago!"

"Danny took care of that by having the janitor send it for him. He evidently escaped from the pen late yesterday, but authorities didn't give out the story until today."

Disappointed over their failure, Penny and Salt drove on toward the theater in glum silence.

Suddenly at the intersection of Jefferson and Huron Streets, a long black sedan driven by a woman, failed to observe a stop sign. Barging into a line of traffic, it spun unsteadily on two wheels and crashed into an ancient car in which two men were riding.

"Just another dumb woman driver," observed Salt. He brought up at the curb and reached for his camera.

"Nobody's hurt so it's hardly worth a picture. But

if I don't grab it, DeWitt'll be asking me why I didn't."

Balancing the camera on the sill of the open car window, he snapped the shutter just as the two men climbed out of their ancient vehicle.

"Looks as if they're going to put up a big squawk," Salt observed with interest. "What they beefin' about? That old wreck isn't worth anything, and anyhow, the lady only bashed in a couple of fenders."

The driver of the black sedan took a quick glance at the two men and said hastily:

"Please don't call a policeman. I'll gladly pay for all the damage. I'm covered by insurance. Just give me your names and where you live. Or, if you prefer, I'll go with you now to a garage where your car can be repaired."

The two men paid her no heed. In fact, they appeared not to be listening. Instead, they were gazing across the street at Salt and his camera.

"Button up your lip, lady!" said one of the men rudely.

He was a heavy-set man, dressed in a new dark blue serge suit. His face was coarse, slightly pale, and his steel-blue eyes had a hard, calculating glint.

His companion, much younger, might have been a country boy for he wore a lumber jacket, corduroy pants, and heavy shoes caked with mud.

The older man crossed the street to Salt's car. He glanced at the "press" placard in the windshield and said curtly:

"Okay, buddy! I saw you take that picture! Hand over the plate!"

CHAPTER

5

THE RED STAIN

"HAND OVER the plate, buddy!" the motorist repeated as Salt gave no hint that he had heard. "You're from a newspaper, and we don't want our pictures printed—see?"

"Sure, I see," retorted Salt. "I'm not turning over any pictures."

The man took a wallet from his suit pocket. "Here's a five spot to make it worth your while."

"No, thanks. Anyway, what's your kick? Your car didn't cause the accident. You're in the clear."

"Maybe we'll use the picture to collect damages," the man said. "Here, I'll give you ten."

"Nothing doing."

To put an end to the argument, Salt drove on.

"Wonder who those birds were?" he speculated.

Penny craned her neck to look back through the rear car window.

"Salt!" she exclaimed. "That man who argued with us is writing down our license plate number!"

"Let him!"

"He intends to find out who you are, Salt! He must want that picture badly."

"He'll get it all right—on the front page of the *Star* tomorrow! Maybe he's a police character and doesn't want any publicity. He looked like a bad egg."

"I wish we'd taken down *his* license number."

"We've got it," replied Salt. "It'll show up in the picture."

Penny settled back in the seat, paying no more attention to the traffic behind them. Neither she nor Salt noticed that they were being followed by the car with battered fenders.

At the theater, Salt parked in the alleyway.

"Go on in," he told Penny, opening the car door for her. "I want to collect some of my stuff and then I'll be along."

At the stagedoor, Penny was stopped by Old Jim, the doorman.

"You can't go in here without a pass, Miss," he said. "There's a newspaper convention on. My orders are not to let anyone in without a pass."

Penny flashed her press card.

"My mistake," the doorman mumbled.

Once inside, Penny wandered backstage in search of her father or Jerry. The program had started, but

after listening a moment to a singer, she moved out of range of his voice.

Now and then, from the audience of newspapermen out front, came an occasional ripple of laughter or clapping of hands as they applauded a speaker.

"Sounds pretty dull," thought Penny. "Guess it's lucky Dad cooked up the shooting stunt. If everything goes off right, it should liven things up a bit."

Wandering on down a hall, she came to one of the dressing rooms. Stacked against the outside wall were hundreds of freshly printed newspapers ready for distribution.

Penny flipped one from the pile and read the headline: "REPORTER SHOT IN ARGUMENT WITH ELECTRICIAN!"

Beneath the banner followed a story of the staged stunt to take place. So convincingly was it written, Penny had to think twice to realize not a word was true. Other columns of the paper contained regular wire news stories and telephoto pictures. Much of the front page also was given over to an account of the convention itself.

"This will make a nice souvenir edition," Penny thought. "Wonder where Jerry is? The stunt will be ruined if he doesn't get here."

Salt came down the corridor, loaded heavily with his camera, a tripod, a reflector, and other photographic equipment.

"Jerry here yet?" he inquired.

"I haven't seen him. It's getting late too."

"He'll be here," Salt said confidently. "Wonder where I'd better leave this revolver?"

Setting the photographic equipment on the floor, he took the revolver from his coat pocket, offering it to Penny.

"Don't give it to me," she protested.

"Put it in the dressing room," he advised. "I can't keep it, because I've got to go out front and shoot some pictures."

"Is the revolver loaded?" Penny asked, taking it unwillingly.

"Sure, with blanks. It's ready for the stunt."

Penny carried the weapon into the dressing room and deposited it on one of the tables. When she returned to the corridor, Salt had gathered up his equipment and was starting away.

However, before he could leave, an outside door slammed. Jim, the doorman, burst in upon them.

"Young feller, is that your car parked in the alley?"

"Yeah!" exclaimed Salt, startled. "Don't tell me the cops are handing me a ticket!"

"Some feller's out there, riflin' through your things!"

Salt dropped his camera and equipment, racing for the door. Penny was close behind.

Reaching the alley, they were just in time to see a

man in a dark suit ducking around the corner of the building.

"Hey, you!" shouted Salt angrily.

The man turned slightly and vanished from view.

"Wasn't that the same fellow who was in the auto accident?" Penny demanded.

"Looked like him! Wonder if he got away with anything?"

"Didn't you lock the car, Salt?"

"Only the rear trunk compartment. Should have done it but I was in a hurry."

"Shall I call the police, Salt?"

"Why bother? That bird's gone now. Let's see if he stole anything first."

Salt muttered in disgust as he saw the interior of the car. A box of photographic equipment had been scattered over the back seat. The door of the glove compartment was open, its contents also helter-skelter.

"Anything missing?" Penny asked.

"Not that I can tell. Yes, there is! Some of the photographic plates!"

"Oh, Salt, I was afraid of it! The thief must have been one of those two men who were in the auto accident! You wouldn't sell them the picture they wanted so they followed you here and stole it!"

"They may have tried," the photographer corrected.

"You mean you still have it?"

"The plates that are missing are old ones, extras I exposed at a society tea and never bothered to develop."

"Then you have the one of the auto accident?"

"Right here in my pocket."

"Oh, Salt, how brilliant of you!" Penny laughed.

"It wasn't brilliancy on my part—just habit," Salt returned. "I wonder why that bird set such great store by the picture? Maybe for some reason he's afraid to have it come out in the paper."

"I can hardly wait to see it developed!"

As Penny and the photographer walked back to the theater entrance, a taxi skidded to a stop at the curb. Jerry alighted.

"Anything wrong?" he inquired, staring curiously at the pair.

Salt told him what had happened.

"Maybe you've got dynamite packed in that plate," Jerry commented when he had heard the story. "Better shoot it to the office and have it developed."

"I'm tied up here for half an hour at least."

"Send it back by the cab driver. He can deliver it to DeWitt."

"Good idea," agreed Salt.

He scribbled a note to accompany the plate and gave it to the cab driver, together with the holder.

"Take good care of this," he warned. "Don't turn it over to any one except the city editor."

After the cab had driven away, Salt, Jerry, and Penny re-entered the theater. Mr. Parker had come backstage and was talking earnestly to the doorman. Glimpsing the three, he exclaimed:

"There you are! And just in time too! The stunt goes on in five minutes."

"Are the newsboys here?" Jerry asked. "And Johnny Bates, the electrician?"

"The boys are out front. Johnny's waiting in the stage wings. Where's the revolver, Salt?"

"I'll get it," Penny volunteered, starting for the dressing room.

The revolver lay where she had left it. As she reached for the weapon, she suddenly sniffed the air. Plainly she could smell strong cigarette smoke.

Penny glanced swiftly about the room. No one was there and she had seen no one enter in the last few minutes.

"Someone must have been here," she thought. "Perhaps it was Old Jim, but he smokes a pipe."

"Penny!" her father called impatiently from outside. "We haven't much time."

Picking up the revolver, she hurriedly joined him.

"Dad, why not call the stunt off?" she began. "Something might go wrong—"

"We can't call it off now," her father cut in impatiently. Taking the revolver from her hand he gave it to Jerry. "Do your stuff, my boy, and don't be

afraid to put plenty of heat into the argument. Remember your cue?"

"I'm to start talking just as soon as the Mayor finishes his speech."

"He's winding it up now. So get up there fast."

As Jerry started up the stairway, Penny trailed him.

"Someone must have been in the dressing room after I left the revolver there," she revealed nervously. "Be sure to check it before you turn it over to Mr. Bates."

The reporter nodded, scarcely hearing her words. His ears were tuned to the Mayor's closing lines. A ripple of applause from the audience told him the speech already had ended.

Taking the last few steps in a leap, Jerry reached the wings where John Bates was waiting. He gave him the revolver and at once plunged into his lines. So convincingly did he argue about the stage lights that Penny found herself almost believing the disagreement was genuine.

The argument waxed warmer, and the actors moved out on the stage in full view of the audience.

"Jerry's good," remarked Salt, who had joined Penny. "Didn't know he had that much ham in him!"

The quarrel now had reached its climax. As if in a sudden fit of rage, the electrician raised the revolver and pointed it at Jerry.

"Take that—and that—and that!" he shouted, thrice pulling the trigger.

Jerry staggered back, clutching in the region of his heart. Slowly, his face contorted, he crumpled to the floor.

Scarcely had he collapsed, than newsboys armed with their papers, began to rush through the aisles of the theater.

"Read all about it!" they shouted. "Reporter Shot in Argument! Extra! Extra!"

The newspapermen chuckled at the joke as they accepted the free papers.

On the stage, Jerry still lay where he had fallen. The electrician, his part ended, had disappeared to attend to regular duties.

"Come on, Jerry!" Salt called to him. "What are you waiting for? More applause? Break it up!"

The reporter did not stir. But on the floor beside him, a small red stain began to spread in a widening circle.

Penny and Salt saw it at the same instant and were frozen with horror.

"Ring down the curtain!" the photographer cried hoarsely. "Jerry's really been shot!"

CHAPTER

6

AMBULANCE CALL

PENNY RAN across the stage to kneel beside Jerry, who lay limp on the floor. In horror, she saw that the red stain covered a jagged area on his shirt front.

"Oh, Jerry!" she cried frantically. "Speak to me!"

The reporter groaned loudly and stirred.

"Hold me in your arms," he whispered. "Let my last hours on this earth be happy ones."

Penny's hands dropped suddenly to her sides. She straightened up indignantly.

"You faker!" she accused. "I should think you'd be ashamed to frighten us so! That's not blood on your shirt! It's red ink!"

Jerry sat up, chuckling. "Ruined a good shirt too!"

"You shouldn't have done it," Penny said, still provoked.

"I wanted to put a little drama into the act. Also, I was curious to see how you would react."

Penny tossed her head, starting away. "You needn't

be so smug about it, Jerry Livingston! And don't flatter yourself I was concerned about you! I was thinking what a scandal it would mean for Dad and the paper!"

"Oh, sure," Jerry agreed, pursuing her backstage and down a corridor. "Listen, Penny, it was only a joke—"

"Not a very funny one!"

"Penny, I'm sorry—I really am. I didn't realize anyone would get so worked up about it."

"I'm not worked up!" Penny denied, spinning on a heel to face him. "It just gave me a little shock, that's all. First, that threat from Danny Deevers. Then when I saw you flattened out, for a minute I thought someone had substituted a real bullet in the revolver and that you had been shot."

"It was a rummy joke—I realize that now. Forgive me, will you, Penny?"

"I suppose so. Just don't try anything like it again."

"I won't," Jerry promised. "Now that my part is finished here, suppose we go somewhere for a bite to eat?"

"With that blotch of red ink on your shirt front?"

"Oh, I'll change it. I brought an extra shirt along. Wait here and I'll be right with you."

Jerry stepped into the dressing room to make the change. Penny, while waiting, wandered back to the stage wings to talk to Salt. However, the photog-

rapher had gone out front and was busily engaged taking pictures of visiting celebrities.

After a few minutes, Penny went downstairs again. Jerry was nowhere to be seen.

The door of the dressing room stood slightly ajar. Penny tapped lightly on it, calling: "Get a move on, Jerry! You're slower than a snail!"

No answer came from inside.

Penny paced up and down the corridor and returned to listen at the door. She could hear no sound inside the room.

"Jerry, are you there?" she called again. "If you are, answer!"

Still there was no reply.

"Now where did he go?" Penny thought impatiently.

She hesitated a moment, then pushed open the door. Jerry's stained shirt lay on the floor where he had dropped it.

The reporter no longer was in the dressing room. Or so Penny thought at first glance.

But as her gaze roved slowly about, she was startled to see a pair of shoes protruding from a hinged decorative screen which stood in one corner of the room.

Jerry, very definitely was attached to the shoes. Stretched out on the floor again, his face remained hidden from view.

Penny resisted an impulse to run to his side.

"Jerry Livingston!" she exclaimed. "You've carried your stupid joke entirely too far! Our date is off!"

Turning her back, she started away. But in the doorway, something held her. She glanced back.

Jerry had not moved.

"Jerry, get up!" she commanded. "Please!"

The reporter made not the slightest response. Penny told herself that Jerry was only trying to plague her, yet she could not leave without being absolutely certain.

Though annoyed at herself for such weakness, she walked across the room to jerk aside the decorative screen.

Jerry lay flat on his back, eyelids closed. A slight gash was visible on the side of his head where the skin was bruised.

One glance convinced Penny that the reporter was not shamming this time. Obviously, he had been knocked unconscious, perhaps by a fall.

"Jerry!" she cried, seizing his hand which was cold to the touch.

Badly frightened, Penny darted to the door and called loudly for help.

Without waiting to learn if anyone had heard her cry, she rushed back to Jerry. On the dressing table nearby stood a pitcher of water and a glass.

Wetting a handkerchief, Penny pressed it to the reporter's forehead. It seemed to produce no effect.

In desperation, she then poured half a glass of water over his face.

To her great relief, Jerry sputtered and his eyelids fluttered open.

"For crying out loud!" he muttered. "What you trying to do? Drown me?"

Raising a hand to his head, the reporter gingerly felt of a big bump which had risen there. He pulled himself to a sitting position.

"What happened, Jerry?" Penny asked after giving him a few minutes to recover his senses. "Did you trip and fall?"

The question seemed to revive Jerry completely. Without answering, he got to his feet, and walked unsteadily to the window overlooking the alley.

Penny then noticed for the first time that it was open. She also became aware of a heavy scent of tobacco smoke in the room—the same cigarette odor she had noticed earlier. Now however, it was much stronger.

Jerry peered out the window. "He's gone!" he mumbled.

"Who, Jerry? Tell me what happened."

"Things aren't too clear in my mind," the reporter admitted, sinking into a chair. "Wow! My head!"

"Did someone attack you?"

"With a blackjack. I came in here and changed my

shirt. Had a queer feeling all the while, as if someone were in the room."

"Were you smoking a cigarette, Jerry?"

"Why, no."

"Did you notice smoke in the room? The odor still is here."

Jerry sniffed the air. "Neco's," he decided. "They're one of the strongest cigarettes on the market and not easy to get. Now that you mention it, the odor was in the room when I came in! But I didn't think about it at the time."

"Then whoever struck you must have been in here waiting!"

"Sure. Whoever it was, came in the window. He was hidden behind that screen. As I started to leave, he reared up and let me have it from behind! That's all I remember."

"Then you didn't see him?"

"No, it happened too fast."

"Jerry, it may have been Danny Deevers!"

"Maybe so," the reporter agreed. "But I always figured if he caught up with me, he wouldn't fool around with any rabbit punches."

"He may have been frightened away, hearing me in the hall," Penny said. "Jerry, do you have other enemies besides Danny?"

"Dozens of them probably. Every reporter has.

But I don't know of anyone who hates me enough to try to lay me out."

The dressing room door now swung open to admit Mr. Parker and several other newspapermen.

"Penny, did you call for help?" her father demanded. "What's wrong?"

"Jerry was slugged," Penny answered, and told what had happened.

"How do you feel, Jerry?" the publisher inquired. "That's a nasty looking bump on your head."

"I'm fit as a fiddle and ready for a dinner date," Jerry announced brightly, winking at Penny. "How about it?"

"Well, I don't know," she replied. "Are you sure you feel up to it?"

"I'm fine." To prove his words, Jerry got to his feet. He started across the room, weaving unsteadily.

Had not Mr. Parker and another man seized him by the arms, he would have slumped to the floor.

"Jerry, you're in no shape for anything except a hospital checkup," the publisher said firmly. "That's where you're going!"

"Oh, Chief, have a heart!"

Mr. Parker turned a deaf ear upon the appeal.

"For all we know, you may have a fractured skull," he said, helping to ease the reporter into a chair. "We'll have you X-rayed."

"I don't want to be X-rayed," Jerry protested. "I'm okay."

"Besides, with Danny Deevers still at large, a hospital is a nice safe place," Mr. Parker continued, thinking aloud. "Perhaps we can arrange for you to stay there a week."

"A week! Chief, I'm not going!"

"No arguments," said Mr. Parker. "You're the same as in Riverview Hospital now. Penny, telephone for an ambulance."

CHAPTER

7

AN EMPTY BED

AT RIVERVIEW hospital twenty minutes later, Jerry was given a complete physical check-up.

"The X-rays won't be developed for another half hour," an interne told him, "but you seem to be all right."

"I not only seem to be, I am," the reporter retorted. "Told you that when I came here! But would anyone listen to me?"

"Twenty-four hours rest will fix you right up. We have a nice private room waiting for you on the third floor. Bath and everything."

"Now listen!" exclaimed Jerry. "You said yourself I'm all right. I'm walking out of here now!"

"Sorry. Orders are you're in for twenty-four hours observation."

"Whose orders?"

"Dr. Bradley. He had a little talk with the publisher of your paper—"

"Oh, I get it! A conspiracy! They're keeping me here to keep me from checking up on Danny Deevers!"

"What's that?" the interne inquired curiously.

"Never mind," returned Jerry, closing up like a clam. "I'll slip you a fiver to get me out of here."

"Sorry. No can do."

The interne went to the door, motioning for two other internes who came in with a stretcher.

"Hop aboard," he told Jerry. "Better come peaceably."

Jerry considered resistance. Deciding it was useless, he rolled onto the stretcher and was transported via the elevator to the third floor. There he was deposited none too ceremoniously in a high bed.

"Just to make sure you stay here, I'm taking your clothes," said the interne. "Now just relax and take it easy."

"Relax!"

"Sure, what you got to kick about? Your bills are all being paid. You get twenty-four hours rest, a good looking nurse, and a radio. Also three meals thrown in."

Jerry settled back into the pillow. "Maybe you've got something after all," he agreed.

"That's the attitude, boy. Well, I'll be seeing you."

Satisfied that Jerry would make no more trouble, he took his clothes and went outside.

Penny and Salt, who had been waiting in the reception room below, stepped from the elevator at that moment.

"How is Jerry?" Penny inquired anxiously as she stopped the interne in the corridor.

"He's all right. Go on in if you want to talk to him."

"Which room?"

"Wait until I put these clothes away and I'll show you."

The interne hung Jerry's suit in a locker at the end of the corridor and then returned to escort Penny and Salt to Room 318.

Jerry, a picture of gloom, brightened as his friends entered.

"I'm sure glad you came!" he greeted them. "I want you to help me get out of here."

"Not a chance," said Salt, seating himself on the window ledge. "This is just the place for you—nice and quiet and safe."

Jerry snorted with disgust.

"Dad and Mr. DeWitt both think Danny Deevers means business," Penny added. "The paper is offering $10,000 reward for his capture."

"Ten thousand smackers! I could use that money myself. And I have a hunch about Danny—"

"Forget it," Salt advised. "This is a case for the police. Just lie down like a nice doggy and behave your-

self. We'll keep you informed on the latest news."

"That reminds me," added Penny. "After the ambulance took you away, Dad had the theater searched and the alley. No clues."

Jerry lay still for several minutes, his eyes focused thoughtfully on the ceiling. "If it's the verdict that I stay here, I suppose I may as well give up and take my medicine."

"Now you're showing sense," approved Salt. "Penny and I have an idea that may help trace Deevers. We'll tell you about it later."

"Sure," retorted Jerry ironically, "spare me the shock now. By the way, did you meet an interne in the hall? He was carrying off my clothes."

"Yes, he brought us here," Penny nodded.

"You didn't happen to notice where he hid my clothes?"

"They're safe, Jerry," Penny assured him. "In a locker at the end of the hall."

The information seemed to satisfy Jerry. Wrapping himself like a cocoon in a blanket, he burrowed down and closed his eyes.

"I want to catch forty winks now," he said. "If you folks have a big idea that will lead to Danny's capture, don't let me detain you."

"Jerry, don't be cross with us," Penny pleaded. "We know how you feel, but honestly, you'll be so much safer here."

Jerry pretended not to hear.

After a moment, Salt and Penny quietly left the room.

"He's taking it hard," the photographer commented as they sped in the press car toward the *Riverview Star* building. "In a way, you can't blame him. Jerry's not the type to be shut up in a nice safe place."

"Dad wants to keep him in the hospital until Danny Deevers is captured, but it will be hard to do it."

Salt, driving with one hand, looked at his watch.

"It's after nine o'clock," he announced. "Penny, you've missed the dinner at the Hillcrest."

"I don't mind. So much has happened today, I've had no time to be hungry."

"Want me to drop you off there now?"

"No, the banquet will be nearly over. I couldn't bear to listen to speeches. Let's go straight to the office and find out what that traffic accident picture shows."

"Suits me, only I'm hungry." On impulse, Salt pulled up in front of a hamburger shop offering curb service. "Let's grab a bite before we really go to work to crack this case."

He tooted the horn and a uniformed girl came hurrying to take his order.

Fortified by sandwiches, coffee, and ice cream, the pair then drove on to the *Riverview Star* office.

Avoiding the busy newsroom, Salt and Penny went

up the back stairs to the photographic studio. Bill Jones, a studio helper, was busy at the wire photo machine.

"Has that picture of the traffic accident I sent over come up yet?" Salt asked him.

"On the desk," the boy answered. "Not too sharp."

Salt picked up a dozen pictures which had been printed on glossy paper and rapidly ran through them until he found the one he sought.

Eagerly Penny peered over his shoulder. The two cars involved in the accident were plainly shown, the license numbers of both visible. In the ancient vehicle, the younger man had lowered his head so that his face was completely hidden. The camera had caught a profile view of the older man, also not clear.

"Lousy picture," said Salt contemptuously.

"It shows the license number of the car. Can't we trace the driver that way?"

"The Motor Vehicle Department is closed now. But I know a fellow who works there. Maybe he'll do us a favor and go back to the office tonight and look up the information."

Salt made the telephone call, and after ten minutes of argument, convinced his friend that the requested information was a matter of life and death.

"He'll do it," the photographer said, hanging up the receiver. "Soon's he gets the information, he'll telephone us here."

Penny had been studying the photograph again. She now was ready with a second suggestion. "Even if the faces aren't very clear, let's compare them with pictures of Danny Deevers in the morgue."

"Good idea," agreed Salt.

The newspaper morgue or library where photographs, cuts and newspaper clippings were carefully filed for reference, was just a few steps down the hall. Miss Adams, the librarian, had gone to lunch, so Salt obtained a key and they searched for their own information.

"Here's an envelope marked Danny Deevers!" Penny cried, pulling it from one of the long filing drawers. "All sorts of pictures of him too!"

Critically, the pair studied the photographs.

The escaped convict was a middle-aged, sullen looking man with hard, expressionless eyes. In one of the pictures, parted lips revealed a set of ugly, uneven teeth.

"This shot I took is so blurred, it's hard to tell if they're the same person or not," Salt complained. "But it looks like Danny."

"If it is, that would explain why he tried to make you give up the plate."

"Sure, he knew the car license number would be a tip-off to the police. But maybe the bird isn't Danny."

"I wish we were certain. Salt, couldn't Jerry identify him from the picture you took?"

"Maybe. Jerry saw Deevers several times before he was put away in the pen."

"Then why not take the picture to the hospital now?"

"Okay," agreed Salt. "Let's go."

Fifteen minutes later, at the hospital, they sought unsuccessfully to pass a receptionist who sat at a desk in the lobby.

"Sorry, visiting hours are over," she explained.

"We're from the *Star*," Salt insisted. "We have to see Jerry Livingston on an important business matter."

"That's different," the receptionist replied. "You may go up to his room, but please make the call brief."

An automatic elevator carried the pair to the third floor. Jerry's door near the end of the corridor stood slightly ajar. Salt tapped lightly on it, and hearing no answer, pushed it farther open.

"Well, what d'you know!" he exclaimed.

Penny, startled by his tone of voice, peered over his shoulder.

The room was deserted. Jerry's bed, unmade, stood empty.

Terra Alta Public Library
Terra Alta, W. Va.

CHAPTER

8

IN SEARCH OF JERRY

"NOW WHAT could have become of Jerry?" Penny murmured as she and Salt gazed about the deserted room in amazement. "Surely we've made no mistake."

"He was assigned this room all right," the photographer declared. "But maybe they changed it later."

"That's it," agreed Penny in relief. "For a minute it gave me a shock seeing that empty bed. I thought perhaps he had taken a bad turn and been removed for emergency treatment."

The pair sought Miss Brent, a floor supervisor.

"Why, the patient in Room 318 hasn't been changed elsewhere," she replied. "At least, not to my knowledge. I've been off the floor for the last half hour."

Inspecting Room 318 to satisfy herself that the bed was empty, Miss Brent questioned several nurses and an interne. No one seemed to know what had become of the patient. There was a whispered conference and then Miss Brent made a call to the superintendent.

"Something has happened to Jerry!" Penny told Salt tensely. "He may have been abducted!"

A nurse came flying up the hall from the locker room.

"Mr. Livingston's clothes are gone!" she reported.

Light began to dawn on Penny. She recalled the seemingly innocent question Jerry had asked earlier that night as to the location of the clothes locker.

"He's probably walked out of the hospital!" she exclaimed.

"Impossible!" snapped Miss Brent, though her voice lacked conviction. "Nurses have been on duty here all the time. Mr. Livingston couldn't have obtained his clothes without being observed."

"The floor was deserted for about ten minutes," an interne recalled. "An emergency case came in and everyone was tied up."

Penny re-entered Jerry's room. The window remained closed and it was a straight drop of three stories to the yard below. She was satisfied the reporter had not taken that escape route.

A sheet of paper, propped against the mirror of the dresser attracted her eye. As she unfolded it, she saw at once that the handwriting was Jerry's.

"I'm too healthy a pup to stay in bed," he had scrawled. "Sorry, but I'm walking out."

Penny handed the note to Miss Brent who could not hide her annoyance as she read it.

"Nothing like this ever happened before!" she exclaimed. "How could the young man have left this floor and the building without being seen? He's in no condition to be wandering about the streets."

"Then Jerry really did need hospitalization?" inquired Penny.

"Certainly. He suffered shock and the doctor was afraid of brain injury. The patient should have been kept under observation for at least twenty-four hours. Wandering off this way is a very bad sign."

"We'll get him back here pronto!" Salt promised. "He can't have gone far."

In the lobby he and Penny paused to ask the receptionist if she had observed anyone answering Jerry's description leave the building.

"Why, no," she replied, only to correct herself. "Wait! A young man in a gray suit left here about twenty minutes ago. I didn't really notice his face."

"That must have been Jerry!" cried Penny. "Which way did he go?"

"I'm sorry, I haven't the slightest idea."

"Jerry may have gone to his room," Penny said hopefully. "Let's call his hotel."

Using a lobby telephone, they dialed the St. Agnes Hotel Apartments where the reporter lived. The desk clerk reported that Jerry had not been seen that night.

"Oh, where could he have gone?" Penny said as she

and Salt left the hospital. "He may be wandering the streets in a dazed condition. Shouldn't we ask police to try to find him?"

"Guess it's all we can do," the photographer agreed. "Jerry sure will be sore at us though."

A taxi cab pulled up near the hospital steps.

"Taxi?" the driver inquired.

Salt shook his head. "We don't know where we want to go yet. We're looking for a friend of ours who left the hospital about twenty minutes ago."

"A girl?"

"No, a man in a gray suit," Penny supplied. "He probably wasn't wearing a hat."

"Say, he musta been the one that asked me about the fare to the swamp!"

At the pair's look of intense interest, the cab driver added: "I was waitin' here for a fare when some ladies came out of the hospital. I pulled up and took 'em aboard. Just then this young feller comes out.

"He didn't seem to notice I had my cab filled, and says: 'How much to take me to Caleb Corners?' "

"Caleb Corners?" Penny repeated, having never heard of the place.

"That's a long ways out, almost to the swamp. I says to him, 'Sorry, buddy, but I got a fare. If you can wait a few minutes I'll be right back and pick you up.' "

"What did Jerry say?" Salt asked.

"He said he wanted to get started right away. Reckon he picked up another cab."

Thanking the driver for the information, Penny and Salt retreated a few steps for a consultation.

"If Jerry started for the swamp at this time of night he must be wacky!" the photographer declared. "That knock on the head must have cracked him up and he doesn't know what he's doing!"

"Why would he start for the swamp? Maybe he remembers what I told him about seeing a stranger there today, and in his confusion, has an idea he'll find Danny Deevers!"

"Jerry can't have had much of a start, and we know he headed for Caleb Corners! I'll go after him."

"We'll both go," Penny said quickly. "Come on, let's get the car."

Before they could leave the hospital steps, the receptionist came hurrying outside.

"Oh, I'm glad you're still here!" she said breathlessly, looking at the photographer. "Aren't you Mr. Sommers?"

"That's me," agreed Salt.

"A telephone call for you."

"Say, maybe it's Jerry! Wait here, Penny. I'll be right back."

Salt was gone perhaps ten minutes. When he re-

turned, his grim expression instantly informed Penny that the call had not been from Jerry.

"It was from my friend in the Motor Vehicle Department," he reported. "He traced the license number of the car that was in the accident."

"How did he know you were here, Salt?"

"Telephoned the office, and someone told him to try the hospital."

"Who owns the car, Salt?"

"A woman by the name of Sarah Jones, Route 3, Crissey Road.

"Crissey Road! Why, that's out near the swamp, not far from Trapper Joe's place! I recall seeing the name on a signpost when Louise and I were out there this afternoon."

"All roads lead to the swamp tonight," Salt commented. "I'm worried about Jerry. I called the office and he hasn't shown up there."

"Then he must have started for Caleb Corners! Salt, we're wasting time!"

"We sure are," he agreed. "Let's go!"

The press car had been parked in a circular area fifty yards from the hospital. Salt and Penny ran to it, and soon were on their way, speeding into the night on a deserted, narrow road.

CHAPTER

9

THE WIDOW JONES

CALEB CORNERS scarcely was a stopping point on the narrow, dusty, county highway.

By night the crossroads were dark and gloomy, unlighted even by a traffic signal. To the right stood a filling station, and directly across from it, a little grocery store, long since closed for the day.

Salt turned in at the filling station, halting the press car almost at the doorway of the tiny office.

Inside, a young man who was counting change at a cash register, turned suddenly and reached for an object beneath the counter. As Salt came in, he kept his hand out of sight, regarding the photographer with suspicion.

"Relax, buddy," said Salt, guessing that the station owner feared robbery. "We're from the *Riverview Star* and need a little information."

"What do you want to know?" The young man still kept his hand beneath the counter.

"We're looking for a friend of ours who may have come out here a few minutes ago in a taxi."

"No cab's been through here in the last hour," the filling station man said. "This is a mighty lonesome corner at night. I should have closed up hours ago, only I'm expecting a truck to fill up here."

"Why not put that gun away?" Salt suggested pointedly. "We're not here to rob you. Do we look like crooks?"

"No, you don't," the man admitted, "but I've been taken in before. This station was broken into three times in the past six months. Only two weeks ago a man and woman stopped here about this same time of night—they looked okay and talked easy, but they got away with $48.50 of my hard earned cash."

"We really are from the *Star*," Penny assured him. "And we're worried about a friend of ours who slipped away from the hospital tonight. He was in an accident and wasn't entirely himself. He may get into serious trouble if we don't find him."

Her words seemed to convince the filling station man that he had nothing to fear. Dropping the revolver into the cash drawer, he said in a more friendly tone:

"I guess you folks are on the square. Anyway, you wouldn't get much if you robbed the till tonight. I only took in $37.50. Not enough to pay me for keeping open."

"You say a cab hasn't been through here tonight?" Salt asked impatiently.

"There's been cars through, but no taxi cabs."

"Where do these roads lead?"

"One takes you to Belle Plain and on to Three Forks. The other doesn't go much of anywhere—just on to the swamp."

"Any houses on the swamp road?" Salt inquired.

"An old trapper has a place up there, and the Hawkins' farm is on a piece. Closest house from here is the Widow Jones'."

"How far?"

"Oh, not more than three—four miles."

"Mrs. Jones drives a car?" Salt asked casually.

"Her?" The filling station man laughed. "Not on your life! She has an old rattle-trap her husband left her when he died, but she doesn't take it out of the shed often enough to keep air in the tires."

Penny and Salt inquired the way to the widow's home.

"You can't miss it," replied the station man. "Straight on down the swamp road about three miles. First house you come to on the right hand side of Crissey Road. But you won't likely find the widow up at this hour. She goes to bed with the chickens!"

On the highway once more, Salt and Penny debated their next move. Jerry's failure to show up at Caleb Corners only partially relieved their anxiety. Now

they could only speculate upon whether the reporter had remained in Riverview or had driven past the filling station without being seen.

"Since we've come this far, why not go on to the Widow Jones' place?" Salt proposed. "She may have seen Jerry. In any case, we can question her about that car she owns."

Bumping along on the rutty road, they presently rounded a bend and on a sideroad saw a small, square house which even in its desolation had a look of sturdy liveability.

"That must be the place," Salt decided, slowing the car. "No lights so I guess she's abed."

"I see one at the rear!" Penny exclaimed. "Someone is up!"

With a jerk, Salt halted the car beside a mailbox which stood on a high post. A brick walk, choked with weeds, led to the front door and around to a back porch.

Through an uncurtained window, the pair glimpsed a tall, wiry woman filling an oil lamp in the kitchen.

As Salt rapped on the door, they saw her start and reach quickly for a shotgun which stood in a corner of the room.

"Who's there?" she called sharply.

"We're from Riverview," answered Penny.

Reassured by a feminine voice, the woman opened the door. She towered above them, a quaint figure in

white shirtwaist and a long flowing black skirt which swept the bare floor of the kitchen.

"Good evening," said Penny. "I hope we didn't startle you."

Slowly the widow's eyes traveled over the pair. She laid the shotgun aside and then said evenly:

" 'Pears like you did. Hain't in the habit o' having visitors this time o' night. Whar be ye from and what do you want?"

Salt told of their search for Jerry, carefully describing the reporter.

"Hain't seen anyone like that," the Widow Jones said at once. "No one been by on this road since sundown 'cepting old Ezekiel Hawkins."

"By the way, do you drive a car?" Salt questioned.

"Not if I kin keep from it," the widow retorted. "Cars is the ruination o' civilization! Last time I tried to drive to town, backed square into a big sycamore and nigh onto knocked all my teeth out!"

"So you sold your car?" Salt interposed.

"It's a settin' out in the shed. That no-good young'un o' Ezekiel's, Coon Hawkins, tried to buy it off'en me a year ago, but I turned him down flat."

"Didn't he offer enough?" Penny asked curiously.

" 'Twasn't that. Fust place, I don't think much o' Coon Hawkins! Second place, that car belonged to my departed husband, and I don't aim nobody else ever will drive it."

"Then you didn't have the car out today or loan it to anyone?"

"No, I didn't! Say, what you gittin' at anyway with all these questions?"

"Your car was involved in an accident this afternoon in Riverview," Salt explained.

"What you sayin'?" the woman demanded. "You must be out o' yer mind! My car ain't been out of the shed fer a month."

"We may have been mistaken," Penny admitted. "The license number of the car was K-4687."

"Why, that's the plate number of mine!" the Widow Jones exclaimed. "Leastwise, I recollect it is!"

"You're certain the car still is in the shed?" Salt asked.

"You got me all confused now, and I hain't cartain of anything. Come in while I get a lantern, and we'll look!"

Penny and Salt stepped into a clean kitchen, slightly fragrant with the odor of spicy catsup made that afternoon. On a table stood row upon row of sealed bottles ready to be carried to the cellar.

The Widow Jones lighted a lantern and threw a woolen shawl over her bony shoulders.

"Follow me," she bade.

At a swift pace, she led the way down a path to a rickety shed which stood far back from the road.

The woman unfastened the big door which swung

back on creaking hinges. Raising her lantern, she flashed the light on the floor of the shed.

"Hit's gone!" she exclaimed. "Someone's stole the car!"

Only a large blotch of oil on the cracked concrete floor revealed where the automobile had stood.

"Have you no idea who took the car?" Penny inquired.

Grimly the Widow Jones closed the shed door and slammed the hasp into place.

"Maybe I have an' maybe I han't! Leastwise, I larned forty years ago to keep my lips shut less I could back up my words with proof."

In silence the widow started back toward the house. Midway to the house, she suddenly paused, listening attentively.

From a nearby tree an owl hooted, but Penny and Salt sensed that was not the sound which had caught the woman's ear.

She blew out the lantern and wordlessly motioned for the pair to move back into the deep shadow of the tree.

Holding her shirt to keep it from blowing in the night breeze, the woman gazed intently toward a swamp road some distance from the boundary of her land. For the first time, Salt and Penny became aware of a muffled sound of a running truck motor.

"Sounds like a car or truck back there in the

swamp," Salt commented. "Is there a road near here leading in?"

"There's a road yonder," the widow answered briefly.

"It goes into the swamp?"

"Only for a mile or so."

"What would a truck be doing in there at this time of night?" Penny probed.

"I wouldn't know," answered the widow dryly. "There's some things goes on in this swamp that smart folkses don't ask questions about."

Without relighting the lantern, she walked briskly on. Reaching the rear porch, she paused and turned once more to Salt and Penny.

"I be much obliged to ye comin' out here to tell me about my car being stole. Will ye come in and set a spell?"

"Thanks, we'll have to be getting back to Riverview," Salt declined the invitation. "It's late."

"You'll catch your death if you stay out in this damp swamp air," the woman said, her gaze resting disapprovingly on Penny's flimsy dress and low-cut slippers. "I'd advise you to git right back to town. 'Evenin' to you both."

She went inside and closed the door.

"Queer character," Salt commented as he and Penny made their way to the roadside. "Forthright to say the least."

"I rather liked her, Salt. She seemed genuine. And she has courage to live here alone at the edge of the swamp."

"Sure," the photographer agreed. "Plenty of iron in her soul. Wonder what she saw there at the edge of the swamp?"

"It seemed to me she was afraid we might try to investigate. Did you notice how she advised us to go directly to Riverview?"

"She did make the remark a little pointed. The Widow Jones is no dumbbell! You could tell she has a good idea who stole her auto, and she wasn't putting out anything about that truck."

Salt had started the car and was ready to turn around. Penny placed a detaining hand on the steering wheel.

"Let's go the other direction, Salt!"

"On into the swamp?"

"It's only a short distance to that other road. If the truck is still there, we might see something interesting."

Salt's lips parted in a wide grin.

"Sure thing," he agreed. "What have we got to lose?"

CHAPTER

10

INSIDE THE WOODSHED

THE THROATY croak of frogs filled the night as Salt, car headlights darkened, brought up at a bend of the road near the swamp's edge.

Entrance to the pinelands could be gained in any one of three ways. A road, often mired with mud, had been built by a lumber mill, and led for nearly a mile into the higher section of the area. There it ended abruptly.

Half a mile away, near Trapper Joe's shack, lay the water course Penny and Louise had followed. From it branched a maze of confusing channels, one of which marked the way to the heart of the swamp. But only a few persons ever had ventured beyond Lookout Island, close to the exit.

The third entrance, also not far from Trapper Joe's, consisted of a narrow boardwalk path nailed to fallen trees and stumps just above the water level. The walk

had fallen into decay and could be used for only five hundred feet.

"Seems like a funny time for a truck to be coming out of the swamp road," Salt remarked, peering into the gloom of the pine trees. "Hear anything?"

Penny listened intently and shook her head. But a moment later, she explained: "Now I do! The truck's coming this way."

"Let's get closer to the road exit," Salt proposed. "We'd better leave the car here, if we don't want to be seen."

Penny's high heels kept twisting on the rutty road, and finally in exasperation, she took them off, stripped away her stockings, and walked in her bare feet.

The truck now was very close and the pair could hear its laboring engine. Salt drew Penny back against the bottle-shaped trunk of a big tree at the road exitway. There they waited.

Presently the truck chugged into view, its headlights doused. On the main road, not ten yards from where Salt and Penny crouched, it came to a jerky halt.

The driver was a husky fellow who wore a heavy jacket and cap which shadowed his face. With him in the cab were two younger men of athletic build. Both wore homespun clothes and stout boots.

As the truck halted, the two younger men sprang to the ground.

Instantly Penny and Salt were certain they had seen one of the strangers before.

"He's the man who drove the accident car this afternoon!" Penny whispered. "The auto stolen from Widow Jones!"

Salt nodded, placing his hand over the girl's lips. He drew her back behind the tree.

The precaution was a wise one, for a moment later, a flashlight beam played over the spot where they had been standing.

"Thought I heard something!" one of the truckers muttered.

"Jest them frogs a-croakin'," his companion answered. "You're gettin' jumpy."

"Let's get a move on!" growled the driver of the truck. "I gotta get this load to Hartwell City before dawn. You keepin' any of the stuff?"

"A couple o' gallons will do us. Too durn heavy to carry."

From the rear end of the truck, the two young men who had alighted, pulled out a large wooden container with handles.

"When do you want me to stop by again?" the truck driver called above the rumble of the motor.

"Can't tell yet," one of the men answered, swinging the heavy container across his shoulder. "Pappy'll send word."

The truck pulled away, and the two young men

started down the road in the opposite direction. Not until they were a considerable distance away, did Penny speak.

"What do you make of it all, Salt?"

"It's got me puzzled," he admitted. "If I'd have seen the truck come out of the swamp at any other time I wouldn't have thought much about it. But considering the way Mrs. Jones acted, some funny business seems to be going on here."

"I'm certain one of those young men was the driver of the accident car this afternoon!"

"It did look like him."

"They must be the Hawkins boys, Coon and Hod," Penny went on, thinking aloud. "What were they doing in the swamp so late at night? And what are they trucking?"

"Echo answers 'what'," Salt replied. "Well, shall we start for Riverview?"

"Without learning for certain who those two fellows are?"

"I would like to know. The only thing is, your father's going to be plenty annoyed when he finds how late I've kept you out."

"Leave Dad to me."

"Okay, but if we run into trouble tonight, we can figure we went out of our way to ask for it."

By this time, the two swampers had vanished into the darkness far up the road.

"They're heading toward Trapper Joe's place," Penny observed. "The Hawkins' farm is just beyond, on the waterway."

"We may as well give them a good start and then follow in the car," Salt decided.

They walked back to the parked automobile where Penny put on her shoes and stockings again. After giving the two strangers a good five minutes start, Salt drove slowly after them, keeping headlights turned off.

Trapper Joe's dismal shack loomed up dark and deserted.

"We'll have to park here," Penny instructed. "The road beyond is terrible and it plays out."

Alighting, the couple looked about for a glimpse of the two swampers. The nearby marsh seemed cold, unfriendly and menacing. Heavy dew lay on the earth and a thick mist was rising from among the trees.

From behind a shadowy bush, two gleaming eyes gazed steadily and unblinkingly at the pair. Penny drew back, nervously gripping Salt's hand.

"It's only a cat," he chuckled.

"A wild one, maybe," Penny shivered. "All sorts of animals live in the swamp, Trapper Joe told me."

"Want to stay in the car and spare those pretty shoes of yours?"

"No, let's go on." The gleaming eyes now had vanished and Penny felt courageous again. Nevertheless,

she kept close beside Salt as they tramped along the dark road.

A pale moon was rising over the treetops, providing faint illumination. Penny and Salt no longer could see the pair they had followed, and were afraid they had lost them completely.

Then they spied the swampers crawling over a fence some distance away.

"There they are!" Penny whispered. "Just as I thought! They're taking a short cut to the Hawkins' place."

Unaware that they were being followed, the two swampers crossed a plowed field, frequently shifting their heavy burden.

Coming at length to the Hawkins' farm, they vanished into the woodshed.

"Guess you were right, Penny," Salt acknowledged, pausing by the fence. "Evidently they're the Hawkins' boys."

The door of the house had opened and a light now glowed in the window. A bulky figure stood silhouetted on the threshold.

"Who's there?" the man called sharply. "That you, Coon?"

From inside the shed came a muffled reply: "Yep, it's me and Hod."

"How'd you make out, son?"

"She's all took care of an' on 'er way to Hartwell

City. Ike says he'll fetch you the cash in a day or two."

"Git to bed soon's you kin," the older man said, apparently pleased by the information. "Your Ma's tired and wants to git to sleep 'for mawning."

He moved back into the house, closing the door.

"Guess we've learned all we can," Salt remarked. "We may as well get a little shut-eye ourselves."

Penny, however, was unwilling to leave so soon.

"I wish we could find out what is in that big container, Salt! After those Hawkins' boys leave, maybe we could sneak a peek."

"And get caught!"

"We can be careful. Salt, we've stumbled into a lot of information tonight that may prove very valuable. We'll never have another chance like it. Come on, Salt, it's worth a try."

Despite his better judgment, Salt allowed himself to be persuaded. For ten minutes the pair waited near the fence. Finally they saw Hod and Coon Hawkins emerge from the shed and enter the house.

Another ten minutes they waited. By that time the light had been extingiushed inside the house.

"Everyone's abed now," Penny said in satisfaction. "Now for the woodshed!"

Crossing the field, the pair approached the tumbledown building from the side away from the house. The woodshed door was closed.

Penny groped for the knob and instead, her hand encountered a chain and padlock.

"Locked!" she muttered impatiently. "Just our luck!"

The rattle of the chain had disturbed a hound penned inside the shed. Before Salt and Penny could retreat, the animal's paws scratched against the door and he uttered a deep and prolonged bay.

"Jeepers!" exclaimed Salt. "We've got to get away from here—and fast!"

Already it was too late. A window on the second floor of the house flew up and Mrs. Hawkins in cotton nightdress and lace cap, peered down into the yard.

"Who's there?" she called sharply. "Answer up if you ain't hankerin' fer a bullet through yer innards!"

CHAPTER

11

AN ABANDONED CAR

FOR SALT and Penny, the moment was a perilous one. In plain view of the upstairs window, they could not hope to escape detection.

But shrewdly, they reasoned that Mrs. Hawkins could not be certain they had been trying to break into the woodshed.

"Oh, is that you, Mrs. Hawkins?" Penny called as cheerily as if greeting an old friend. "I hope we didn't awaken you."

The farm woman leaned far out the window. "Who be ye folkses?" she demanded suspiciously. "What you doin' here?"

"Don't you remember me?" Penny asked. "I stopped here this afternoon with my girl friend. We had a drink at your pump."

"Humph! That ain't no gal with you now! Who is he?"

"Oh, just a friend who works at—" Penny was on

the verge of saying the *Riverview Star*, but caught herself in time and finished—"a friend who works where I do."

"And what you spyin' around here for?"

"We're looking for another friend of ours."

" 'Pears to me you got a heap o' friends," the woman said harshly. "This afternoon you was cryin' you lost a dog."

"It was Louise who lost the dog," said Penny, well realizing that her story would never convince the woman.

"Whatever you lost, man or beast, git off this property and don't come back!" Mrs. Hawkins ordered. "We hain't seen no dog, and we hain't seen none o' yer friends. Now git!"

Another face had appeared at the window—that of the bearded stranger Penny had seen earlier in the day on Lookout Point. No longer could she doubt that he was Ezekiel Hawkins, the man who a few minutes earlier had ordered his two sons to bed.

"We're leaving now," said Salt, before Penny had an opportunity to speak again of Louise's missing dog. "Sorry to have bothered you."

Taking Penny firmly by an elbow, he pulled her along. Not until they had reached the fence safely did they look back.

In the upper window of the Hawkins' house a light continued to burn dimly.

"We're still being watched," Salt commented. He helped Penny over the fence, disentangling her dress which snagged on a wire. "Whew! That was a close call! That old biddy would have enjoyed putting a bullet through us!"

"She dared to say Louise's dog hadn't been seen! All the while her husband stood right there! He's the one who refused to let us go after Bones this afternoon!"

"Sure?"

"Almost positive."

"Well, all I can say is the Hawkins' are mean customers," Salt sighed. "Stealing a dog probably is right in their line."

"They're up to other tricks too!"

"Oh, undoubtedly. Wish we could have learned what was in those cans they were trucking to the city."

In the press car, speeding toward Riverview, the pair discussed all phases of their night's adventure. Failure to learn anything about Jerry's whereabouts worried them.

Presently, worn out, Penny slumped against Salt's shoulder and fell asleep. She was awakened when the car stopped with a jerk.

"Where are we?" she mumbled drowsily. "Home?"

"Not yet, baby," he answered, shutting off the engine.

Penny straightened in the seat, brushing away a lock

of hair which had tumbled over her left eye. Peering through the window she saw that they still were out in the country.

"What are we stopping here for, Salt?" she asked in astonishment. "Don't tell me we've run out of gas!"

"Nothing like that," he said easily. "Just go back to sleep. I'll be right back."

"You'll be right back! Where are you going, Salt Sommers?"

"Only down the road a ways. We passed a car, and I want to have a better look at it."

By now Penny was fully awake.

"I'm going with you," she announced.

Salt held the door open for her. "This probably is a waste of time," he admitted.

"Was it a car you saw in the ditch?" Penny questioned, walking fast to keep up with him. "An accident?"

"Don't think so. The car seemed to be parked back in the bushes on a road bisecting this one."

"What's so unusual in that?"

"Nothing perhaps. Only the car looked familiar."

"Not Jerry's coupe?"

"No. There it is now—see!" Salt pointed through the trees to an old upright vehicle of antiquated style. His flashlight picked up the numbers on the rear license plate.

"K-4687!" Penny read aloud. "Mrs. Jones' stolen auto!"

"It sure is," the photographer agreed in satisfaction. "Abandoned!"

"By whom? The Hawkins' boys?"

"Maybe. Let's have a closer look."

While Penny stood by, Salt made a thorough inspection of the old car. The battery was dead. Ignition keys, still in the lock, had been left turned on.

As the photographer flashed his light about, Penny noticed a package of cigarettes lying on the seat. She picked them up and sniffed.

"Necos," she declared. "Salt, one of the persons who rode in this car must have slugged Jerry at the theater!"

"Maybe, but we can't be sure. Necos aren't a common brand of cigarettes. On the other hand, I've known several fellows who smoke them."

A thorough inspection of the car revealed no other clues.

"We may as well get back to town," Salt said finally. "Mrs. Jones will be glad to learn her car has been recovered. We can let her know tomorrow after police have had a chance to inspect it."

Neither he nor Penny had much to say as they motored toward Riverview. Both were deeply discouraged by their failure to find any trace of Jerry.

"It's barely possible hospital officials were able to catch up with him," Penny said after a while, her eyes on the dark ribbon of highway ahead. "We might stop somewhere and telephone."

"Good idea," agreed Salt. "We're practically in the city now."

Already they could see the twinkling lights, laid out in rectangular street patterns. Directly ahead, at the corporation boundary, Penny saw the flashing electric sign of a hamburger hut operated by Mark Fiello, a genial old Italian.

"We might stop there," she suggested. "Mark will let us use his phone."

"Also, he has good hamburgers and coffee," Salt added. "I could go for some food!"

Mark, a stout, grizzled man in slightly soiled apron, was frying bacon and hamburgers at the grill as he shouted orders to a helper in the kitchen.

"You, Frankey!" he bellowed. "Git your nose outta dat ice cream and squeeze another quart of orange juice! What you think I pay you for—to eat me out of business?"

As Penny and Salt slid onto stools in front of the counter, he turned toward them to ask briskly: "What'll it be, folks?"

"Now Mark, don't give us the professional brush off," Salt joked. "Make mine a hamburger with everything on."

"And mine with everything off—especially onions," added Penny.

"Two hamburgers coming right up," chuckled Mark, flattening twin hunks of ground meat on the grill. "I giva you good beeg ones. One-a with, and one-a without. Haven't seen you folks in a long while. How you been?"

"Pretty well, Mark, until tonight," replied Penny. "May we use your phone?"

"It's your nickel, ain't it?" chuckled Mark. "Go right ahead."

"Looks as if we'll have to wait until your helper gets through using it," observed Salt.

"That worthless no-good!" Mark snorted. "I pay him thirty dolla a week to eat his head off and all the time calla dat girl of his! You, Frankey! Git off dat phone and git to work on them oranges!"

Frank, a youth of sallow complexion and unsteady gaze, dropped the telephone receiver as if it were a red hot coal.

He mumbled a "call you later," into the transmitter, hung up, and ducked into the kitchen.

"Such bad luck I have this summer," sighed Mark, expertly turning the hamburgers and salting them. "Six helpers I hire and fire. All no good. They talka big, eat big—but work? Naw!"

"It's a tough life," Salt agreed, fishing for a coin in his pocket. "Change for a dime, Mark?"

"Sure. Who you calla tonight? Big scoop for de paper, eh?"

"I wish it were," said Salt. "We've had a tough night."

"Jerry's missing," Penny added earnestly. "He was taken to the hospital this afternoon, but he walked out. We're trying to find him because he's in no condition to be wandering about."

Mark's jaw had dropped and for a moment he forgot the hamburgers sizzling on the grill.

"You looka for Jerry? Jerry Livingston?"

"Sure, you know him," Salt replied, starting for the telephone. "He used to be one of your favorite customers."

"Well, what do y'know!" mumbled Mark, obviously surprised. "What do y'know! Listen, I tell you something!"

"About Jerry?" Penny asked eagerly.

"You looka for your friend too late!"

"Too late? What do you mean, Mark? Jerry hasn't been hurt?"

"No! No! Your friend is all right like always. Twenty minutes ago, he eata three hamburgs on dis same stool where you sit now!"

"Jerry was here!" Penny cried joyfully. "Mark, are you sure?"

"Sure, I am sure! Jerry eata three beeg hamburgs, drinka two beeg cups of java, then go away."

"Did he seem dazed or confused?"

"Your friend the same as always. Make-a the joke."

On the grill, the hamburgers were beginning to burn at the edges. Mark flipped them between buns, adding generous quantities of mustard, pickle, catsup, and sliced onions to Salt's sandwich.

Penny now was so excited she scarcely could take time to eat.

"Which way did Jerry go when he left here?" she questioned eagerly.

"He crossa de street. After dat, I did not see."

"Jerry lives in the St. Agnes Apartments not far from here," Salt recalled. "Maybe he's there now!"

Quickly finishing their sandwiches, the pair gave Mark a dollar, refusing to accept change. As they started away, he followed them to the door.

"You know-a somebody who wanta good job, good pay?" he whispered. "Frankey is eating me outta all my profits. You know-a somebody?"

"Afraid we don't," Salt replied. "We'll keep it in mind though, and if we hear of anyone wanting work, we'll send him around."

From the hamburger hut, Penny and Salt drove directly to the St. Agnes Apartment Hotel. The clerk on duty could not tell them if Jerry were in his room or not.

"Go on up if you want to," he suggested. "Room 207."

Climbing the stairs, they pounded on the door. There was no answer. Salt tried again. Not a sound came from inside the room.

"It's no use," the photographer said in disappointment. "Mark may have been mistaken. Anyway, Jerry's not here."

CHAPTER

12

A JOB FOR PENNY

PENNY GAZED at Salt in grim despair. "I was so sure Jerry would be here," she murmured. "What can we do now?"

"We've run down every clue," he replied gloomily. "If he isn't at the hospital, I'm afraid it's a case for the police."

"But Mark was so sure he had seen Jerry tonight. Try once more, Salt."

"Okay, but it's useless. He's not here."

Again Salt hammered on the door with his fist. He was turning away when a sleepy voice called: "Who's there?"

"Jerry is in there!" Penny cried. "Thank goodness, he's safe!"

"Open up, you lug!" ordered Salt.

A bed creaked, footsteps padded across the carpet and the door swung back. Jerry, in silk dressing gown, blinked sleepily out at them.

"What do you want?" he mumbled. "Can't you let

a fellow catch forty winks without sending out the riot squad?"

"How are you feeling, Jerry, my boy?" Salt inquired solicitously.

"Never felt better in my life, except I'm sleepy."

"Then what made you walk out of the hospital?"

"I don't like hospitals."

"We ought to punch you in the nose for making us so much trouble," Salt said affectionately. "Here we spent half the night searching the swamp for you!"

Jerry's face crinkled into a broad grin. "The swamp! That's good!"

"Didn't you ask a taximan at the hospital how much it would cost to go there?" Penny reminded him.

"Sure, but I decided not to go."

"You got a nerve!" Salt muttered. "Climb into your clothes and we'll take you back to your cell."

"Oh, no, you don't!" Jerry backed away from the door. "I'm no more sick than you are, and I'm not going back to the hospital!"

"You're an advanced case for a mental institution!" the photographer snapped. "Maybe you don't know Danny Deevers is out to get you and he means business!"

"I'm not worried about Danny."

"Maybe you don't think he cracked you on the head tonight at the theater?"

"I've been thinking it over," Jerry replied slowly.

"Probably it was Danny, but I doubt he'll dare show his face again. Police are too hot on his trail."

"Says you!" snorted Salt. "By the way, why were you so interested in going to the swamp tonight? Any clues?"

"Only the information you and Penny gave me."

"We learned a little more this evening," Penny informed him eagerly. "And we have a photograph we want you to identify."

The story of their findings at Caleb Corners and beyond, was briefly told. Salt then showed Jerry the picture of the ancient car which had been involved in the traffic accident.

"This older man is Danny Deevers," Jerry positively identified him after studying the photograph a minute. "I don't recognize the driver of the car."

"We're almost sure he's one of the Hawkins' boys," Penny declared. "You know, the swamper we told you about."

Jerry nodded. "In that case, putting the finger on Deevers should be easy for the police. The Hawkins family could be arrested on suspicion. Like as not, Deevers is hiding in the swamp just as Penny suspected!"

"If he is, it won't be easy to capture him," commented Salt. "They say a man could hide there a year without being found. And if the Hawkins' boy is arrested, he'll naturally lie low."

Jerry thoughtfully studied the photograph again. "That's so," he admitted. "Anyway, our evidence is pretty weak. We couldn't pin anything on either of the Hawkins' boys on the strength of this photograph."

"It would only involve Mrs. Jones," contributed Penny. "Why turn it over to the police?"

"Well, it would relieve us of a lot of responsibility. Tell you what! I know the Chief pretty well. Suppose I give the picture to him and ask him to go easy on Mrs. Jones? I think he would play along with us."

"Sounds like a good idea to me," approved Salt. "The police can watch the Hawkins place and maybe learn Danny's hideout without tipping their hand."

The matter of the photograph settled, he and Penny turned to leave.

"We'll send the hospital ambulance after you, Jerry," Salt said by way of farewell. "Better get into some duds."

"I'm not going back there!"

"It's no use trying to make him," said Penny who knew from experience that the reporter could be stubborn. "But do be careful, won't you, Jerry?"

"Sure," he promised. "And thanks to both of you for all your trouble!"

The hour now was well past midnight. Saying goodbye to Jerry, Penny had Salt take her directly home.

Quietly she slipped into the house and upstairs to her own room without disturbing Mrs. Weems.

However, next morning, explanations were in order, and as was to be expected, the housekeeper did not look with approval upon the trip to the swamp.

"Your motives may have been excellent," she told Penny," but your judgment was very poor. Even with Salt as an escort you shouldn't have gone."

To make amends, Penny stayed close at home that morning, helping with an ironing. At noon when her father came for luncheon, she eagerly plied him with questions about the Danny Deevers case.

"There's nothing new to report," Mr. Parker said. "He's still at large. The *Star* has posted a $10,000 reward for his capture."

"Ten thousand!" echoed Penny, her eyes sparkling. "I could use that money!"

Mr. Parker carefully laid down his knife and fork, fixing his daughter with a stern gaze.

"You're to forget Danny Deevers," he directed. "Just to make certain you do, I've arranged with Mr. DeWitt to give you a few days' work at the office. Kindly report at one-thirty this afternoon for your first assignment."

"Oh, Dad! Of all times—I had plans!"

"So I figured," her father replied dryly. "Mr. DeWitt, I trust, will keep you busy until after Danny Deevers has been rounded up by the police."

Penny knew that protests were quite useless, for when her father really set down his foot, he seldom changed his mind. At another time, she would have welcomed an opportunity to work at the *Star* office, but this day she regarded it as nothing less than punishment.

As her father had predicted, Penny was kept more than busy at the office. There were telephones to answer, obituaries to write, wire stories to redo, and a multitude of little writing jobs which kept her chained to a desk.

Penny pounded out page after page of routine copy, her face becoming longer and longer. Whenever the shortwave radio blared, she listened attentively. Never was there any news to suggest that police were even taking an interest in Danny Deevers' escape.

"Oh, they're working hard on the case," Jerry assured her when she talked it over with him. "You'll hear about it in good time."

"Everyone treats me as if I were a child!" Penny complained. "Just wait! If ever I get any more information, I'm keeping it under my hat!"

For two long days she worked and suffered in the newspaper office. Then late one afternoon, Mr. DeWitt beckoned her to his desk.

"You act as if you need a little fresh air," he said. "Take a run over to the Immigration Office. See a

man named Trotsell. He'll tell you about a boy who entered this country illegally. They're looking for him now."

"I'll hippety-hop all the way!" Penny laughed, glad to escape from the office.

At the Immigration Building, Mr. Trotsell, an official of brisk manner and crisp speech, gave her the facts of the case in rapid-fire order.

"The boy is only sixteen," he said. "His name is Anthony Tienta and he was befriended by G.I.'s in Europe. Early in the war, his parents were killed. Anthony was put in an orphan's asylum by Fascists. He and another lad escaped to the mountains. For six months they lived in a cave on berries and what they could pilfer."

"Interesting," commented Penny, "but what is your connection with the case?"

"I'm coming to that. When G.I.'s entered Italy, Anthony left his mountain hideout to become a guide. He learned English and later joined an American division as a mascot. When the war ended, Anthony sought permission to come to this country and was turned down repeatedly."

"So he stowed aboard a troopship?"

"Yes, we don't know yet how he eluded Immigration officials in New York. Somehow he slipped into the country. Later he was traced to a farm in Michi-

gan. We were closing in on him, when someone tipped him off and he fled. We know he's somewhere in this state."

"Near here?"

"It's very possible. We thought if a story appeared in the paper, someone who has seen the boy may report to us."

"Do you have a picture of him?"

"Unfortunately, no. He is sixteen, with dark eyes and dark, curly hair. The lad is athletic and very quick witted. His English is fairly good, heavily sprinkled with G.I. slang."

"I'll write the story for you," Penny promised as she arose to leave. "The truth is, though, my sympathy is with Anthony."

"So is mine," replied the official. "However, that does not change the law. He entered this country illegally and must be returned to Italy."

Penny left the office and was midway to the newspaper office when she bumped squarely into her friend, Louise Sidell, who had been downtown shopping.

"Oh, Lou!" she exclaimed. "I called you twice but you weren't at home. Did Bones ever find his way back?"

Louise shook her head. "He never will either. Those men probably kept him on the island. I'm going out there tomorrow."

"To the island?"

"If I can get Trapper Joe to take me. My father says I may offer him twenty-five dollars to help me get Bones back."

"It was entirely my fault, Lou. I'll pay the money."

"You needn't."

"I want to," said Penny firmly. "I've earned a little money the past two days at the newspaper office."

The two girls walked together to the next corner.

"What time are you starting for Trapper Joe's tomorrow?" Penny asked.

"I'd like to leave right after breakfast. Any chance you could take me in your car?"

"I was thinking the same thing," grinned Penny. "It may take a little doing—but yes, I'm sure you can count on me! I'm long overdue for a date myself with Old Man Swamp!"

CHAPTER

13

INTO THE SWAMP

BY ELEVEN o'clock the next morning, the two girls were on their way to Caleb Corners in Penny's car. Both wore high boots, heavy shirts, and riding breeches, having dressed carefully for the swamp.

"I had one awful time convincing Dad and Mrs. Weems I should make this trip," Penny remarked as they parked the car under a giant oak not far from Trapper Joe's shack on the river creek. "If we hadn't had Bones for an excuse, they never would have allowed me to go."

Louise stared curiously at her chum.

"Why else would we make the trip?" she inquired.

"Oh, we're going there to find Bones," Penny assured her hastily. "But if we should meet Ezekiel Hawkins or whoever was on the island—"

"My parents made it very clear I'm not to go to the island unless Trapper Joe is with us."

"So did my father, unfortunately," sighed Penny.

As the girls approached Trapper Joe's shack, they saw smoke issuing in a straight column from the rear of the premises.

Investigating, they found the old guide roasting a fat turkey on a spit which slowly revolved above a fire of cherry red coals.

"Howdy," the old man greeted them. "You're jest in time fer some victuals."

"Lunch so early?" Louise asked in surprise.

"It hain't breakfast and it hain't lunch," the trapper chuckled. "I eat when I'm hongry, an' right now I feel a hankerin' fer food. Kin I give you a nice turkey leg?"

The girls looked at the delicately browned fowl and wavered.

"I'll fetch you'uns each a plate," the trapper offered.

From the shack he brought two cracked ones and forks with bent tines. To each of the girls he gave a generous helping, saving for himself a large slice of breast.

"What brings ye here today?" he presently asked. "Be ye aimin' to rent my boat again?"

"Providing your services go with it," Penny replied. "We want to search for Louise's dog."

"Tain't likely you'll ever see him again."

"All the same, we've planned on searching the island thoroughly. Will you take us?"

Trapper Joe tossed away a turkey bone as he ob-

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Terra Alta, W. Va.

served: "There's cottonmouths on that island and all manner o' varmints."

"That's why we want you to go with us," Penny urged. "We'll be safe with you."

"I hain't so sartain I'll be safe myself," Joe argued. "My gun's been stole. Some thieven scalawag made off with it late last night while I was skinnin' an animal. Left it a-settin' against a post down by the dock. The rascal took my gun and some salted meat I had in a crock!"

"Someone who came from the swamp?" Penny asked quickly.

" 'Pears he must o' come from there."

"Could the thief have been one of the Hawkins family?"

"Tain't likely," the guide replied. "They all got good guns o' their own. Anyhow, the Hawkins' hain't never stooped so low they'd steal from a neighbor."

"Will you take us in your boat?" Louise urged impatiently. "We'll pay you well for your time. If we find Bones, you'll receive an extra twenty-five dollars."

"It hain't the money. Lookin' fer that dog would be like lookin' fer a needle in a haystack."

"You might accidently run into the person who stole your gun," Penny suggested.

"Now, there'd be some sense to that," the trapper

said with sudden interest. "I'd like to lay hands on him!"

"Then you'll go?" the girls demanded together.

" 'Pears like I will," he said, his leathery face cracking into a smile. " 'Taint smart going into the swamp without a gun, but we kin trust to Providence an' our wits, I calculate."

Pleased that the trapper had consented, the girls leaped to their feet and started toward the skiff which was tied up at the dock.

"Not so fast!" the trapper brought them up short. "We got to take some water and some victuals with us."

"But we're not going far," Louise said in surprise. "We just ate."

"Ye can git mighty hongry and thirsty, rowin' in a broiling hot sun. When I go into the swamp, I always takes rations along jest in case."

"Surely you don't expect to lose your way," Penny said teasingly. "An old timer like you!"

"I'm an old timer 'cause I always prepares fer the wust," the trapper retorted witheringly. "Many a young punk's give his life being show-off and foolhardy in that swamp. I was lost there oncst years ago. I hain't never forgot my lesson."

Properly put in their places, Penny and Louise said no more as Trapper Joe prepared for the trip into the

swamp. He wrapped the remains of the turkey in a paper, depositing it in a covered metal container in the bottom of the skiff.

Also, he dropped in a jug of water and an extra paddle.

"Tell us about the swamp," Louise urged as they finally shoved off. "Is it filled with wild and dangerous animals?"

"Bears mostly been killed off," the old trapper replied, sending the skiff along with powerful stabs of the oars. "The rooters are about the wust ye run into now."

"Rooters?" Louise repeated, puzzled.

"Wild hogs. They got a hide so tough even the rattlers can't kill 'em. It's most likely yer dogs been et by one."

"Oh, no!" Louise protested in horror.

"Rooters'll go straight fer a dog or a deer or a lamb. They'll attack a man too if they're hongry enough. Their tusks are sharp as daggers."

Penny quickly changed the subject by asking Trapper Joe if he thought Pretty Boy Danny Deevers might be hiding in the swamp.

" 'Taint likely," he replied briefly.

"Why do you think not?"

"City bred, waren't he?"

"That's what I was told."

"No city bred feller could live in the swamp many days. He wouldn't have sense enough to git his food; at night the sounds would drive him crazy, and he'd end up bein' bit by a snake."

"Yet someone stole your gun," Penny reminded him.

"It waren't Danny," said the old trapper with finality.

The skiff glided on. As the sun rose high overhead pouring down upon their backs, Penny and Louise began to feel drowsy. Repeatedly, they reached for Joe's jug of water.

As the channel became congested with floating plants and rotted logs, the trapper shipped the oars and used a paddle.

Presently they came within view of Lookout Island. In the bow, Penny leaned forward to peer at the jungle-like growth which grew densely to the water's edge.

"Someone's on the island!" she exclaimed in a low voice.

"Sure, it's Coon Hawkins doin' a little fishin'," agreed the trapper. "His boat's pulled up on the point."

Louise stirred uneasily. "Is anyone with him?" she whispered.

"Don't see no one 'cepting Coon. He won't hurt

ye. Harmless, ole Coon is, an' mighty shiftless too."

"But is Coon really fishing?" Penny demanded suspiciously.

"He's got a pole and a string o' fish."

"Also, he's watching us very closely," whispered Penny. "I don't trust him one bit! He's hiding something on that island! I'll be surprised if he doesn't try to keep us from landing."

CHAPTER

14

A CODE MESSAGE

THE OLD trapper appeared not to have heard Penny's whispered observation. He paddled the skiff on until it drifted within ten yards of the point where Coon Hawkins sat fishing.

"Howdy!" called the trapper.

"Howdy," responded Coon, his gaze on the bobbing cork.

"Seen anything of a dog on the island?"

"Hain't no animal hereabouts," Coon replied.

" 'Pears like the gals has lost a dog," said the old trapper, dipping his paddle again. "We're landin' to have a look around."

Coon's gaze shifted from the cork to the party in the boat. He scowled and then coldly turned his back.

"Suit yerself," he said indifferently. "You won't find no dawg here."

Trapper Joe beached the skiff very nearly where Penny had landed a few days earlier.

"Have a keer," he advised as the girls trod through the muck. "Watch out fer snakes."

"Here are Bones' tracks!" Louise cried a moment later, spying the prints which led away from the shore.

A short distance in, the tracks abruptly ended, but nearby were prints of a man's shoe and larger ones made from a heavy boot.

Trapper Joe noted them in silence, signaling for Penny and Louise to make no comment.

"Wait here while I look around," he instructed.

Penny and Louise sat down on a mossy log to wait. Coon paid them no heed, completely ignoring their presence. The sun climbed higher overhead.

Presently the old trapper returned, his clothing soaked with perspiration.

"Did you see anything of Bones?" Louise asked eagerly.

"Nary a sign. The dog hain't on the island."

"Told ye, didn't I?" Coon demanded triumphantly.

"That ye did, son," agreed Trapper Joe. "We'll be gittin' along." On his way to the skiff, he asked carelessly: "Come here offen, do ye?"

"When I feels like it," Coon retorted.

"Fishin' good?"

"Fair to middlin'."

The old trapper helped the girls into the skiff and shoved off.

"Please, must we turn back now?" Louise asked

earnestly. "I hate to return without finding a trace of poor old Bones."

"Tain't likely you'll ever see the dog again."

"We realize that," said Penny, "but it would be a satisfaction to keep looking."

"If the dog was still alive, it hain't likely he'd of swum away from the island."

"He could have been carried," Penny said, keeping her voice low.

The swamper stared steadily at her a moment, saying nothing.

"Besides, we'd like to go deeper into the swamp just to see it," Penny urged, sensing that he was hesitating. "It must be beautiful farther in."

"It is purty," the old guide agreed. "But you have to be mighty keerful."

"Do take us," Louise pleaded.

The old trapper raised his eyes to watch a giant crane, and then slowly turned the skiff. As he sought a sluggish channel leading deeper into the swamp, Penny noticed that Coon Hawkins had shifted his position on the point, the better to watch them.

The skiff moved on into gloomy water deeply shadowed by overhanging tree limbs. Only then did Penny ask the trapper what he thought really had happened to Louise's dog.

"Tain't easy to say," he replied, resting on the paddle a moment and taking a chew of tobacco.

Penny sensed that the old man was unwilling to express his true opinion. He stared moodily at the sluggish water, lost in deep thought.

"The Hawkins' are up to something!" Penny declared. She was tempted to reveal what she and Salt had seen a few nights before on the swamp road, but held her tongue.

"After all, what do I know about Joe?" she reflected. "He may be a close friend of the Hawkins family for all his talk about them being a shiftless lot."

Penny remained silent. Sensing her disappointment because he had not talked more freely, Trapper Joe presently remarked:

"You know, things goes on in the swamp that it's best not to see. Sometimes it hain't healthy to know too much."

"What things do you mean?" Penny asked quickly.

Old Joe however, was not to be trapped by such a direct question.

"Jest things," he returned evasively. "Purty here, hain't it?"

The guide was now paddling along a sandy shore. Overhead on a bare tree branch, two racoons drowsed after their midday meal.

"In this swamp there's places where no man has ever set foot," the guide continued. "Beyond Black Island, in the heart o' the swamp, it's as wild as when everything belonged to the Indians."

"How does one reach Black Island?" Louise inquired.

"Only a few swampers that knows all the runs would dast go that far," said Old Joe. "If ye take a wrong turn, ye kin float around fer days without findin' yer way out."

"Is there only one exit—the way we came in?" Penny asked.

"No, oncst ye git to Black Island, there's a faster way out. Ye pick yer way through a maze o' channels 'till ye come to the main one which takes ye to the Door River."

"You've made the trip?"

"Did when I was young. Hain't been to Black Island in years lately."

"How long does the trip take?"

"Not many hours if ye know the trail. But if ye take a wrong twist, y'er apt to wind up anywheres. We're headin' toward Black Island now."

"Then why not go on?" cried Penny eagerly. "It's still early."

The old guide shook his head as he paddled into deeper water. "It's jest a long, hard row and there hain't nothin' there. I'm takin' ye to a place where some purty pink orchids grow. Then we'll turn back."

Penny suddenly sat up very straight, listening intently.

From some distance away came a faint, metallic pounding sound.

"What's that noise?" she asked, puzzled.

The old trapper also was listening alertly.

Again the strange noise was repeated. Bing-ping-ping! Ping-ping!

"It sounds like someone pounding on a sheet of metal!" exclaimed Penny. "I'd say it's coming from the edge of the swamp—perhaps Lookout Island!"

The trapper nodded, still listening.

Again they heard the pounding which seemed in a queer pattern of dots and dashes.

"It's a code!" Penny declared excitedly. "Perhaps a message is being sent to someone hiding here in the swamp!"

"In all the times I've been in these waters, I never before heard nothin' like that," the guide admitted. "I wonder—"

"Yes?" Penny prodded eagerly.

But the old guide did not complete the thought. The boat now was drifting in a narrow run where boughs hung low over the water, causing the three occupants to lean far forward to avoid being brushed.

A tiny scream came from Louise's lips. The bow of the skiff where she sat had poked its nose against a protruding tree root.

Within inches of her face, staring unblinkingly into her eyes, was a large, ugly reptile!

CHAPTER

15

BEYOND THE BOARDWALK

"STEADY! STEADY!" warned the old swamper as Louise shrank back in horror from the big snake. "Don't move or he'll strike!"

Digging his paddle into the slimy bed of the narrow run, Trapper Joe inched the skiff backwards. Should the boat jar against the tree root, he knew the snake almost certainly would strike its poisonous fangs into Louise's face.

"Hurry!" she whispered.

Slowly the skiff moved backwards through the still water, until at last it lay at a safe distance. The snake had not moved from its resting place.

Now that the danger was over, Louise collapsed with a shudder.

"You saved me!" she declared gratefully.

"It weren't nothin'," he replied as he sought another run. "There's thousands o' varmints like him in this swamp."

"And to think Penny and I dared come here by ourselves the other day! We didn't realize how dangerous it was!"

The incident had so unnerved both of the girls, that some minutes elapsed before they recalled the strange pounding sound which had previously held their attention.

"I don't hear it now," Penny said, listening intently. "Just before we ran into that snake, you were about to say something, Joe."

The guide stopped paddling a moment. "Was I now?" he asked. "I don't recollect."

"We were talking about the strange noise. You said you never had heard anything like it before in the swamp. Then you added—'I wonder—' "

"Jest a-thinkin'," Joe said, picking up the paddle once more. "One does a lot o' that in the swamp."

"And not much talking," rejoined Penny, slightly annoyed. "What do you think made the noise?"

"Couldn't rightly say."

Realizing it was useless to question the old man further, Penny dropped the subject. However, she was convinced that Joe had at least a theory as to the cause of the strange pounding sound.

"He knows a lot he isn't telling," she thought. "But I'll never get a word out of him by asking."

If Joe were unwilling to discuss the signal-like tap-

pings, he showed no reluctance in telling the girls about the swamp itself.

Wild turkey, one of the wariest fowls in the area, could be found only on the islands far interior, they learned. Although there were more than a dozen species of snakes, only three needed to be feared, the rattlers, the coral snake, and the cottonmouth.

"Ye have to be keerful when yer passin' under tunnels o' overhanging limbs," Old Joe explained. "Sometimes they'll be hangin' solid with little snakes."

"Don't tell us any more," Louise pleaded. "I'm rapidly losing enthusiasm for this place!"

"Snakes mostly minds their own business 'less a feller goes botherin' 'em," Trapper Joe remarked. "Too bad more folks ain't that way."

The boat floated on, and the heat rising from the water became increasingly unpleasant. Penny mopped her face with a handkerchief and considered asking the old man to turn back.

Before she could speak, Joe who had been peering intently at the shore, veered the skiff in that direction.

"Are the orchids here?" Louise asked in surprise.

Old Joe shook his head. "Jest want to look at something," he remarked.

He brought the skiff to shore, and looking carefully about for snakes, stepped out.

"May we go with you?" asked Penny, whose limbs

had become cramped from sitting so long in one position.

"Kin if yer a mind to, but I only aim to look at that dead campfire."

"A campfire?" Penny questioned. "Where?"

The old trapper pointed to a barren, dry spot a few feet back from the water's edge, where a circle of ashes and a few charred pieces of wood lay.

"Why, I hadn't noticed it," Penny said. Wondering why the trapper should be interested in a campfire, she started to ask, but thought better of it. By remaining silent, she might learn—certainly not if she inquired directly.

Trapper Joe gazed briefly at the camp-site, kicking the dead embers with the toe of his heavy boot.

"Thet fire hain't very old—must have been built last night," he observed.

"By a swamper, I suppose," said Penny casually. "One of the Hawkins' family perhaps."

"It hain't likely they'd be comin' here after nightfall. An that fire never was built by a swamper."

"Then a stranger must be hiding in the area!" Penny cried. "Danny Deevers!"

"Maybe so, but Danny was city-bred and never could survive long in the wilds. One night here would likely be his last."

"Supposing someone who knew the swamp were helping him?"

"Thet would make it easier, but it weren't Danny Deevers who built this fire."

"How can you be so positive?"

"Deevers was a big man, weren't he?"

"Why, fairly large, I guess."

"Then would he be leavin' little tracks?" Joe pointed to several shoeprints visible in the soft muck. "This man, whoever he be, didn't have anyone campin' with him. Leastwise, there hain't no tracks except from the one kind o' shoe."

"I guess you're right," agreed Penny, disappointed to have her theory exploded. "I wonder who did camp here?"

"I'm a-wonderin' myself," replied the old trapper. "If it's the feller thet stole my gun, I'd like pow'ful well to catch up with him."

Joe inspected the ground for some distance inland, satisfying himself that no one was about. As they returned to the boat, he said thoughtfully:

"Not in years heve I been as far as Black Island, but I've got an itch to go there now."

"Good!" chuckled Penny. "I want to see the place myself."

"It's a long, hard row. I couldn't rightly take you'uns."

"Why not?"

"Fer one thing, I hain't sure what I'll find at the island."

"All the better," laughed Penny.

But the old trapper was not to be persuaded. "The trip ain't one fer young'uns. Likewise, with three in a boat, it's hard goin'. Part o' the way, the run's so shallow, ye have to pole."

"In a polite way, he's telling us we're excess baggage," Louise said, grinning at Penny. "To me it sounds like a long, hot trip."

"I kin go another day," said the trapper. "There hain't no hurry."

"But you're well on your way there now," Penny remarked. "How long would it take to go and return here—that is, if you went alone?"

"Two hours if I made it fast."

"Then why not go?" Penny urged generously. "Isn't there somewhere Louise and I could wait?"

"Without a boat?" Louise interposed in alarm.

"I hain't suggestin' ye do it," said the old trapper. "But there is a safe place ye could wait."

"Where?" asked Penny.

"On the plank walk."

"Does it extend so far into the swamp?"

"This is a section of an old walk that was put in years ago," Joe explained. "It used to hook up with the planking at the entranceway, but it went to pieces. Folks never went to the trouble to rebuild this section."

"All right, take us there," Penny urged, ignoring Louise's worried frown. "If we're above the water, we should be safe enough."

The old trapper rowed the girls on a few yards to a series of shallow bays where water lilies and fragrant pink orchids grew in profusion. As they drew in their breath at the beautiful sight, he chuckled with pleasure.

"Purty, hain't it?" he asked. "Gatherin' posies should keep ye busy for awhile. The boardwalk's right here, and goes on fer quite a spell before it plays out. If ye stay on the walk, you'll be safe until I git back."

Louise gazed with misgiving at the old planks which were decayed and broken. As she and Penny alighted, the boards swayed at nearly every step.

"Ill pick ye up right here, soon's I can," the old guide promised. "If ye keep to the shade, ye won't git so much sunburn."

"What if you shouldn't get back before nightfall," Louise said nervously. "Wouldn't we be stranded here?"

"I'll git back."

"Where does the walk lead?" Penny asked.

"Nowheres in particular any more. Ye'd best not foller it far. Jest wait fer me purty close here, and I'll be back soon's I kin."

Reaching into the bottom of the skiff, the trapper tossed a parcel of lunch to Penny.

"Here's some meat if ye git hongry while I'm gone. Mind ye stay on the planks!"

With this final warning, Joe paddled away and soon was lost to view behind the tall bushes.

CHAPTER

16

TREED BY A BOAR

LEFT TO themselves, Penny and Louise walked a few steps on the sagging planks which had been nailed to tree stumps. The boards beneath them creaked protestingly and dipped nearly into the water.

"We must have been crazy!" Louise exclaimed. "We'll die of boredom waiting here. Two hours too!"

"It is a long time."

"And if Joe shouldn't come back, we're stranded—absolutely stranded."

"We did take a chance, Louise, but I'm sure Joe can be trusted."

"He seems all right, but what do we really know about him?" Louise argued. "If anything queer is going on here in the swamp, he may be mixed up in it!"

"I thought about that," Penny admitted. "Anyway, if we're to learn anything, we had to take a certain

amount of chance. I'm sure everything will be all right."

Slowly they walked on along the rickety planks, now and then bending down to pluck a water lily. Louise quickly jerked back her hand as a water snake slithered past.

"Ugh!" she gasped. "Another one of those horrid things!"

Interested to learn where the planks led, the girls followed the bridge-like trail among the trees. Louise, however, soon grew tired. As they presently came to a stump which offered a perfect resting place, she sat down.

"This is as far as I'm going," she announced.

"But we have lots of time to explore, Louise. Don't you want to learn where this boardwalk goes?"

"Not at the risk of falling into the water! At any rate, I'm tired. If you want to explore, go on alone. I'll wait for you here."

Penny hesitated, reluctant to leave her chum alone.

"Sure you won't mind, Louise?"

"I'd much rather wait here. Please go on. I know you'll never rest until you reach the end of the walk."

Thus urged, Penny, with the package of lunch still tucked under her arm, picked her way carefully along.

The board path curved on between the trees for some distance only to end abruptly where boards had

rotted and floated away. After a break of several yards, the walk picked up again for a short ways, but Penny had no intention of wading through water to follow it further.

Pausing to rest before starting back, she noticed beyond the water oaks a narrow stretch of higher land covered with dense, wild growth. Above the trees a huge buzzard soared lazily.

"Ugly bird!" she thought, watching its flight.

Penny was about to turn and retrace her steps, when she noticed something else—footsteps in the muck not far from the end of the boardwalk.

"Someone has been here recently," she reflected. "Those prints must have been made since the last rain."

Even from some distance away, Penny could see that the shoemarks were small ones.

"Probably the person who made them is the same fellow who built the campfire," she thought. "Wonder where the footprints lead?"

Penny tried to draw her eyes away, but the footprints fascinated and challenged her. She longed to investigate them further. However, she had not forgotten Trapper Joe's warning that it was unsafe to leave the boardwalk.

"If I watch out for snakes and only go a short ways, what harm can it do?" she reasoned.

A moment more and Penny was off the walk, treading her way cautiously along the muddy bank. She paused to listen.

All was very quiet—so still that it gave the girl an uneasy feeling, as if she were being watched by a multitude of hostile eyes.

The footprints led to a large tree in a fairly open area. On one of the low, overhanging bushes, a bit of dark wool had been snagged.

"Someone climbed up there either to rest or sleep," Penny thought.

In the bushes close by, the girl heard a faint, rustling sound.

"Who's there?" she called sharply.

No one answered. All was still for a moment. Then again she heard the whisper of disturbed leaves.

Penny's flesh began to creep. Suddenly losing all interest in the footprints, she decided to beat a hasty retreat to the boardwalk.

The decision came too late. Before she could move, a dozen big rooters led by an old gray boar, swarmed out of the bushes, surrounding her.

Too frightened and startled to cry out, Penny huddled back against the tree trunk. The rooters had spread out in a circle and slowly were coming closer.

Retreat to the safety of the boardwalk was completely cut off. The leader of the pack now was so near that she plainly could see his razor-sharp ivory

tusks. In another moment, the animal would attack.

Throwing off the paralysis of fear which gripped her, Penny swung herself into the lowermost branch of the big trees. The package of lunch she had carried, dropped from her hand, falling at the base of the trunk.

Instantly, the rooters were upon it, tearing savagely at the meat and at each other. Sick with horror, Penny clung desperately to the tree limb.

"If I slip now, I'm a gonner!" she thought. "Those rooters are half starved. If I fall, they'll attack me!"

Penny considered shouting for Louise, but dismissed the thought as quickly as it came. Her chum probably was too far away to hear her cries. If she did come, unarmed as she was, she might leave the boardwalk only to endanger herself.

"Louise can't help me," Penny told herself. "I brought this on myself by not heeding Old Joe's warning. Now it's up to me to get out of the mess the best way I can."

The girl lay still on the limb, trying not to draw the attention of the rooters. Once they finished the meat, she was hopeful they would go away. Then she could make a dash for the walk.

Grunting and squealing, the rooters devoured the meat and looked about for more. To Penny's relief, they gradually wandered off—all except the old boar.

The leader of the pack stayed close to the big tree,

eyeing the girl in the tree wickedly. Even in the dim light she could plainly see his evil little eyes and working jaws.

"Go away you big brute!" she muttered.

Penny's perch on the limb was a precarious one and her arms began to ache from the strain of holding on. Unsuccessfully, she tried to shift into a more comfortable position.

"I may be treed here for hours!" she thought. "Can I hold on that long?"

The old boar showed no disposition to move off, but kept circling the tree. It seemed to the now desperate Penny, that the animal sensed she was weakening and only awaited the moment when she would tumble down to the ground.

Breaking off a small tree branch she hurled it defiantly at the boar. The act caused her to lose her balance. Frantically, she clawed for a foothold but could not obtain it. Down she slipped to the base of the tree.

The old boar, quick to see his opportunity, charged. With a scream of terror, Penny leaped aside and the animal rushed past, squealing in rage at having missed his prey.

Even now, the boar stood between the girl and the plank walk. The tree from which she had fallen, offered her only refuge, and as she measured her chances,

she realized that the probability of regaining the limb was a slim one.

The boar had turned and was coming for her again.

But at that instant, as Penny froze in terror, a shot was fired from somewhere in the bushes behind her. The bullet went straight and true, stopping the boar in his tracks. He grunted, rolled over, twitched twice, and lay still.

CHAPTER

17

RESCUE

WITH A SOB of relief, Penny whirled around to thank her rescuer. Through the thick leaves of the bushes she could see the shadowy figure of a man. But even as she watched, he retreated.

"Wait!" the girl cried.

There was no answer, and before she could call out a word of thanks for deliverance, the man had vanished.

His disappearance reminded her that though she had been snatched from the jaws of death, the danger by no means was over. At any moment the herd of rooters might return to attack.

Turning, Penny ran swiftly to the planked walk, in her haste not watching where she stepped. Her boots sank deeply in muck. Once on the planks well above the water level, she paused to catch her breath, and to gaze searchingly toward the bushes. All now was still.

"Who could my rescuer have been?" she mused. "Why didn't he wait for me to thank him?"

Penny called several times but received no reply. Finally, giving up, she started slowly back along the walk toward the bay where she had left Louise.

More than the girl realized, the adventure had unnerved her. She felt weak all over, and several times as she gazed steadily at the water, became dizzy and nearly lost her balance.

"Guess I'm not tough enough for swamp life," she reflected. "If ever I get out of here in one piece, I'm tempted to forget Danny Deevers and let the police do all the searching."

Footsteps became audible on the boardwalk some distance away.

Every sense now alert to danger, Penny halted to listen.

Someone was coming toward her, moving swiftly on the creaking planks.

"Penny!" called an agitated voice.

Penny relaxed as she knew that it was her chum. "Louise!" she answered, running to meet her.

Rounding a clump of bushes, and walking gingerly on the narrow boards, Louise stopped short as she beheld her friend.

"Why, you're as white as a ghost!" she exclaimed. "And I distinctly heard you shout! What happened? Did you see a snake?"

"A snake would be mild compared to what I've been through. Were you ever eaten alive?"

"Not that I recall."

"Well, I escaped it by the skin of my teeth," Penny said, rather relishing the adventure now that the story made such good telling. "I was saved by a mysterious stranger!"

Louise gazed at her chum anxiously and reached out to touch her forehead. "You're hot and feverish," she insisted. "This trip has been too much for you."

"I'm as cool as a piece of artificial ice!" Penny retorted. "Furthermore, I'm not touched by the heat!"

"Well, something is wrong with you."

"I've just had the fright of my life, that's all. If you'll give me a chance, I'll tell you what happened."

"The stage is all yours, sweet. But don't give me any tall tale about being rescued by a Prince Charming disguised as a frog!"

Penny's lips compressed into a tight line. "I can see you'll never believe the truth, Lou. So I'll prove it to you! Come with me, and I'll show you the animal that nearly made mince meat of me."

Treading single file, the girls returned the way Penny had come, to the end of the planks.

"Look over at the base of that big tree," Penny instructed, pointing. "What do you see?"

"Nothing."

"The boar that was shot—why, it should be there!"

Penny scarcely could believe the sight of her own eyes. "But it's gone!"

"It's gone because it never was there. Penny, you're suffering from too much heat."

"I'm not! Neither am I imagining things! That old boar was there ten minutes ago. Either he came back to life and went off, or someone dragged him away."

"And your mysterious rescuer?" Louise teased. "What became of him?"

"I wish I knew! Lou, I'm not imagining any of this! Surely you must have heard the shot?"

"Well, I did hear something that sounded like one."

"Also, the lunch is gone. All that remains of it, is the paper lying over there by the tree."

"I do see a newspaper," Louise conceded.

"And that broken tree branch lying on the ground? I was up the tree and threw it at the boar. That's how I lost my balance and fell."

Louise now was convinced the story had solid foundation. "Start from the beginning," she urged.

Penny related what had occurred, rather building up the scene in which she had been delivered from death by the bullet shot from behind a bush.

"Whoever the man is, he must be somewhere close by," Louise said when she had finished. "Perhaps we can find him."

"Not a chance! He's deliberately hiding. Besides,

I know better than to leave the walk again. It's dangerous!"

"In that case we may as well go back and wait for Joe," Louise said.

Treading their way carefully, the girls returned to the far end of the boardwalk. To their surprise, they saw a boat approaching.

"Why, it looks like Joe in the skiff!" Penny commented. "But he isn't due back for a long while yet."

Watching the oncoming boat for a moment, Louise said: "It's Joe all right, and he's coming fast. Something must be wrong."

Soon the guide brought the skiff alongside the sagging boardwalk.

"I heard a shot and started back," he explained. "I sure am glad to see both o' ye safe."

Before Penny could do so, Louise told Joe what had befallen her chum.

"Ye could have been kilt by that old boar," he said soberly. "It was the package o' meat that drew them rooters to the tree. They hain't likely to attack a human lest they're half starved."

"I wish I knew who saved me," Penny said. "Could it have been one of the Hawkins' boys?"

"From the sound, I'd say that shot weren't fired from their rifles. More'n likely it came from my own gun!"

"The stolen one?"

"That's what I'm a-thinkin'. If I could see the bullet that was fired, I could tell fer sure."

"The boar disappeared and the bullet with him," Penny said. "That's another queer thing."

"Whoever kilt the critter may have drug him off, or maybe the animal was only stunned." The guide squinted at the lowering sun. "I'd like powe'ful well to see the place, but it's gitten late. We gotta git back."

"What did you learn at Black Island?" Louise asked as she and Penny climbed into the skiff.

"Never got half way there," the guide said in disgust. "Since I went in last time, the main channel's clogged thick with hyacinths. To find yer way in now's a half day's job."

"Can't we try again tomorrow?" Penny asked eagerly.

The old guide gazed at her quizzically as he dipped his paddle. "Hain't ye had enough o' the swamp after today, young'un?"

"When that old boar came for me, I told myself if ever I got safely away, I'd never come again. But that was only a passing impulse. Black Island interests me."

"It's the most dangerous part of the swamp."

"Because of wild animals, you mean?"

"There's lots wuss things than animals," said the old guide soberly.

"For instance?"

Trapper Joe ignored Penny's question. Becoming as one deaf, he propelled the skiff with powerful strokes.

Penny waited patiently, but the guide showed no inclination to say more about Black Island.

"Shall we make it tomorrow?" she inquired presently.

"Make what?" Joe's wrinkled face was blank.

"Why, I mean, shall we visit Black Island!"

"I hate to disappoint ye, but we hain't a-goin'."

"You may be busy tomorrow. Later in the week perhaps?"

"Not tomorrer nor never. I hain't takin' the responsibility o' bringin' ye young'uns into the swamp agin."

"But why?" wailed Penny. "I wish now I hadn't told you about that old boar!"

"It hain't the boar that's got me worried."

"Then you must be afraid of something on Black Island—something you learned today and are keeping to yourself!"

"Maybe that's it," returned Joe briefly. "Anyhow, we hain't goin'. And it won't do no good to try coaxin' me with yer female wiles. My mind's made up!"

Having delivered himself of this ultimatum, the guide plied his paddle steadily.

The set of his jaw warned Penny it would be useless to tease. With a discouraged sigh, she settled down into the bottom of the skiff to think.

CHAPTER

18

WANTED—A GUIDE

SINCE THE eventful trip to the swamp, several days now had elapsed, and from Penny's viewpoint, nothing of consequence had happened.

Each day the *Riverview Star* carried a story giving details of the police search for Danny Deevers, and on each succeeding morning the account became shorter, with less new information.

Twice, it was rumored police were closing in on the escaped convict, and twice the rumor proved false.

At the request of Salt Sommers and Jerry Livingston, posses made several searches of the outer swamp area. However, no trace of the missing man was found, and investigators quickly switched their activities elsewhere.

Spurred by the *Star's* reward offer, clues, anonymous and otherwise, came to both the newspaper and police officials. All proved worthless.

"It begins to look as if Danny has pulled out of this

territory," Mr. Parker remarked to Penny late one afternoon as she sat in his office at the plant. "At least he's made no further attempt to carry out his threat against Jerry."

"Maybe he's only lying low and waiting until the police search cools off a little."

"Quite possible," the publisher agreed, frowning as he fingered a paperweight. "In that case, Jerry is in real danger. I'll never feel entirely easy in my mind until Deevers is behind bars again."

"Speaking of me, Chief?" inquired a voice from the doorway.

Jerry stood there, a long streamer of pasted copy paper in his hand. He had written a story of a political squabble at city hall, and needed Mr. Parker's approval before handing it over to the typesetters.

The publisher quickly read the article, pencilled an "okay" at the top, and returned it to the reporter.

"Good stuff, Jerry," he approved. "By the way, any news of Danny Deevers?"

"Nothing new."

"Jerry, I can't help feeling he's hiding either in the swamp or somewhere close by," Penny interposed eagerly. "At least something queer is going on out there."

"That's what Salt thinks. We were out there last night."

"In the swamp?" Penny asked, caught by surprise.

"Not in it, but near the Hawkins' place."

"What did you learn, Jerry?"

"Frankly, nothing. You remember that swamp road where you and Salt saw the truck?"

"Yes, of course."

"We watched there for quite awhile around midnight."

"Did you see the truck stop there again?"

"No, but we thought we saw a couple of men at the edge of the swamp—apparently waiting for someone. We tried to sneak up close, but I'm afraid we gave ourselves away. Anyway, they vanished back among the trees."

"Did you notice or hear anything else unusual, Jerry?"

"Well, no. Not unless you'd call pounding on a dishpan out of the ordinary."

"A dishpan!" Penny exclaimed. "Who did it?"

"We couldn't tell. Salt and I heard the sound soon after we had passed the Hawkins' place on our way toward the swamp."

"What sort of sound was it?"

"Just a metallic tap-tap-tap. It may not have been on a dishpan."

"Were the taps in code, Jerry?"

"Couldn't have been a very complicated one for the pounding only lasted a minute or two. It was irregular though."

"Then I'm sure it was a code!" Penny cried. "Louise and I heard the same sound when we were with Trapper Joe in the boat!"

"Did the noise come from outside the swamp?"

"Inside, I'd say."

"Then we may not have heard the same thing. The pounding noise Salt and I noticed, came from the direction of the Hawkins' farm. It may have had no significance."

Before Jerry could say more, Editor DeWitt called him to the copy desk. Mr. Parker turned again to his daughter.

"Penny, if I were you, I'd try to forget Danny Deevers," he advised. "Whatever you do, don't go into the swamp again unless you're with Joe or another guide. Better still, don't go at all."

"Oh, Dad!"

"No good can come of it. Do I have your promise, Penny?"

"But I feel I should try to recover Louise's dog!"

"We'll buy her a new pet."

"It won't be Bones."

"The chance that the dog ever will be found is slim," Mr. Parker said. "In any case, he's not worth the risk of trying to find him. Your promise, Penny?"

"That I won't go in without a guide?" she asked, seizing upon the lesser of two evils. "All right, I promise."

The next day it rained, keeping Penny closely confined at home. However, the following morning gave promise of being sunny and pleasant.

Arising early, she packed a lunch for herself, dressed in hiking clothes with heavy boots, and was ready to leave the house by the time Mrs. Weems came downstairs for breakfast.

"Up so early, Penny?" she inquired.

"Just going on a little trip. Don't expect me back very early."

The housekeeper regarded her severely. "Penny Parker, you're not going to the swamp again!"

"Figured I might."

"Does your father know you're going?"

"We talked it over a day or so ago. He doesn't mind so long as I go with Trapper Joe or another guide."

"In that case I suppose I can't object," Mrs. Weems sighed. "Mind, you don't set foot in the swamp without someone along!"

"I've already given my promise to Dad."

"And do be careful," the housekeeper added. "I'll not feel easy until you're back."

Though neither she nor Penny knew it then, the girl's absence from home was to be a long one, and both were to have many uncomfortable moments before her return.

Reaching the swamp sometime later, Penny parked

the car and walked to Trapper Joe's shack on the creek.

The old guide was sitting on the sagging porch, his feet propped on the railing. Catching sight of Penny he frowned slightly, but as she came up, greeted her in a friendly way.

" 'Mawnin'," he said briefly. "What's on yer mind this time?"

"Can't you guess?" Penny asked, sitting down on a step at his feet.

"If yer wantin' me to take you into the swamp agin, yer only wastin' yer words. I hain't got the time."

"I'll pay you well."

"It hain't the money."

"Then why do you refuse to take me in?"

"Tole ye, didn't I? I got work to do."

Penny knew that Joe was only making excuses, for obviously, one day was very like another in his carefree life.

"What work do you have this morning that can't wait, Joe?"

"Well, fer one thing I gotta smoke out a swarm o' bees and git me a nice mess o' honey fer winter. Want to go with me?"

"Into the swamp?"

"No, this tree hain't in the swamp."

"Then I don't want to go. Joe, I think you're stubborn! You know how much this trip means to me."

"Reckon I do."

"Then why not take me? Tell me your reason for refusing."

Old Joe gazed steadily at Penny and for a moment seemed on the verge of making interesting revelations. But to her disappointment, he shook his head.

"Jest don't wanter go, thet's all."

"You learned something the other day when we were in the swamp!" Penny accused. "You're keeping it from me—probably to protect someone! Isn't that it?"

"Hain't saying."

"You know Danny Deevers is hidden somewhere in the swamp! You're helping to protect him!"

Old Joe's feet came down from the railing with a thump. "Now that hain't so!" he denied. "I got no time fer the likes o' Danny Deevers. If I knowed where he is, I'd give him up to the law."

"Well, someone is hiding there! I heard Ezekiel Hawkins talking on Lookout Point, didn't I? We found the dead campfire. Your gun was stolen, and later a mysterious person rescued me when I was treed by the boar."

"Could have been one o' the Hawkins."

"You don't honestly believe that, Joe."

"No, reckon I don't," the guide sighed. "You sure kin shoot questions at a feller faster'n these new Army rockets I hear tell about. I'd like to tell ye what ye

want to know, but there's things best not talked about. Knowin' too much kin be dangerous."

Penny scarcely could hide her annoyance, for several times now the guide had made similar hints.

"I don't trust the Hawkins' family at all," she announced. "If they're not involved with Danny Deevers, they're up to something here in the swamp. Otherwise, why would they be so mean?"

"The Hawkins' family always has been mean an' ornery."

"Another thing—" Penny started to mention how she and Salt had seen large containers of some unknown product being removed from the swamp, but broke off as she decided to keep the information to herself."

"Yeah?" inquired the guide.

"Nothing," replied Penny. "If you won't take me into the swamp, is there anyone else who will?"

"Couldn't say fer sure," Joe replied, "but I reckon I'm the only guide herebouts fer maybe fifty miles."

"Won't you reconsider?"

"You put up a powe'ful strong argument, young'un, but I gotta say no fer yer own good."

"You've certainly ruined all my plans," Penny said crossly. "Well, since you won't help me, I'll say goodbye."

Back in the car once more, she could not bring herself to return home so early in the morning. Debating

a moment, she drove to the homestead of the Widow Jones.

Dressed in a bright calico dress, the woman sat under a shade tree skillfully cutting up the meat of a turtle and dropping it into a pan of cold water.

As Penny walked across the weed-choked yard, she looked up in a startled way, but smiled as she recognized the girl.

"I'm fixin' to have me a nice soup," she explained. "Ye cook the turtle with diced carrots, potatoes, okra, and tomatoes and serve it piping hot. Ever et any?"

"No, I never have," Penny replied, watching the preparations with interest. "It sounds good."

"Ye kin stay and have dinner with me," the woman invited. "I'll fix some flour biscuits and we'll have a right nice meal."

"I'm afraid I'll have to get back home," Penny said regretfully. "My trip here today was a failure."

Because the Widow Jones gave her an inquiring look of sympathy, she explained that Trapper Joe had refused to take her into the swamp. She went on to tell why the trip meant so much to her, and of her belief that a clever investigator who knew the area might find clues which would lead to the capture of Danny Deevers.

"So Joe wouldn't take ye?" the Widow Jones inquired softly. "Why?"

"He says it's dangerous."

"And since when has Joe got so a-feared of his shadow?"

"It did sound like an excuse to me. I think he knows what is going on in the swamp, and wants no part of it."

"Ye say it means a lot to ye to make the trip?"

"Oh, yes, I'd do it in a minute, if I could find anyone who knows the channels. But Joe says he's the only guide for fifty miles around."

Mrs. Jones slapped the last piece of turtle meat into the water with a splash. She arose, gathering her long skirts about her.

"Joe's maybe fergettin' that as a gal, my paw taught me every crook and turn of the swamp. Hain't been in there fer quite a spell now, but I got a hankerin' to go agin."

Penny stared at her incredulously.

"You mean you'll take me?" she demanded. "Today? Now?"

"I've got a quilt I should be piecin' on this afternoon, but hit can wait. If you hain't afeared to place yerself in my hands, I'll take you."

"I'll jump at the chance! But do you have a boat?"

"We'll make Joe lend us his!" the widow said grimly. "And if he tries squirmin', well, I know how to handle him!"

CHAPTER

19

PENNY'S PLAN

MAKING ELABORATE preparations for the trip into the swamp, Mrs. Jones packed a lunch, and donned a huge straw hat and stout boots.

However, she did not change the long, flowing skirt, which flopped about her ankles as she and Penny walked through the meadow to Trapper Joe's dock.

From the porch, the old guide saw the pair and watched them warily.

"We're takin' yer boat, Joe," the widow called to him from the creek's edge. "We're makin' a little trip into the swamp."

Joe pulled himself from the chair and came quickly to the dock.

"Hold on now!" he protested. "Two wimmin can't go alone into the swamp! Leastwise, not beyond Lookout Point."

"Says who?" retorted the widow, already untying the boat.

"That young 'un's talked you into goin' to Black Island! Ye can't do it. You'll git lost in one o' the false channels. The hyacinths are bad this year."

The widow hesitated, then tossed her head as she dropped the package of lunch into the skiff.

"Ye forgit I was swamp raised! Git me the paddles and a pole, Joe. Don't stand there gawkin'."

"No wimmin ever went as far as Black Island. It hain't safe!"

"My Paw took me there when I was a little girl. I hain't forgittin' the way."

"Ye'r stubborn as a mule!" Joe accused, glaring at her. "If you're dead set on goin', I see I'll have to give in and go with ye. But it's agin my best judgment."

"No one asked ye to go with us, Joe," the widow said tartly. "We aim to make this trip by ourselves. Jest git the paddles and pole."

Joe threw up his hands in a gesture of defeat and started slowly for the shack. "Wimmin!" he muttered. "There jest hain't no sense in 'em!"

He took his time inside the shack, but finally returned with the requested paddles and pole.

"There ye are!" he snapped. "But I'm warnin' ye, if ye git into trouble or lost, don't expect me to come after ye."

"Now I'll take the kicker motor," the widow ordered, paying no heed to his words.

"Not my motor!" Joe exclaimed defiantly. "I paid sixty dollars fer it secondhand and I hain't lettin' no female ruin it."

"Ye can't expect me to blister my hands rowin' all day," the widow replied. "We aim to make a quick trip."

"Ye can't use the motor in all them hyacinths!"

"Maybe not, but it'll take us through the open spots a heap faster. The motor, Joe."

Grumbling loudly, the guide went to the house once more. He came back with the motor which he attached and started for the widow.

"Thank ye kindly, Joe," she grinned at him as the boat pulled away from the dock. "I'll make ye one of my apple pies when I git back."

"*If ye get back*," the guide corrected morosely.

Propelled by the motor, the skiff sped steadily through the channel and came presently to the Hawkins' farm. The popping of the engine, which could be heard some distance, drew Mrs. Hawkins to the dock.

She signaled the boat as it drew near.

"Howdy," the Widow Jones greeted her politely though with no warmth. She throttled down the engine and drifted in toward shore.

"Goin in fer a little fishin', I take it," Mrs. Hawkins observed by way of inquiry. "But where's yer fishin' poles?"

"Left 'em ter home," the widow replied.

"Then you hain't fishin'."

" 'Pears like yer right smart at usein' yer eyes," the widow agreed dryly.

A slight frown which did not escape Penny, puckered the farm woman's forehead. She seemed on the verge of speaking, then appeared to change her mind. As the boat drifted on, she watched stolidly.

"Never did like that woman," Mrs. Jones commented when the skiff had rounded a bend. "She's got sharp eyes, and she don't approve 'cause we're goin inter the swamp together."

"Why should she care?" Penny asked.

"I wonder myself."

"I've noticed that she always seems to be watching the entrance channel into the swamp," Penny said thoughtfully. "Perhaps she is the one who taps out those signals!"

"Signals? What do you mean, young'un?"

Penny told of the strange pounding noises she had heard during her previous trip through the swamp.

"I could almost wager Mrs. Hawkins will wait until we're a safe distance away, and then signal!" the girl went on. "Don't I wish I could catch her though!"

"Maybe ye kin. We could shut off the motor and drift back and watch."

Penny's eyes began to sparkle with excitement. "I'd love to do it. But won't she be listening for the sound of our motor as we go deeper into the swamp? If

she doesn't hear it, she's apt to suspect something."

"Ye've got a real head on yer shoulders," said the widow approvingly. "By the way, I don't like to keep callin' ye young'un now we're good friends. What's yer name?"

"I thought you knew. I'm sorry. It's Penny Parker."

"Penny! I never did hear o' a girl named after money."

"I wasn't exactly," Penny smiled. "My real name is Penelope, but no one ever liked it. So I'm called Penny."

"Penelope, hain't sich a bad name. That's what I'll call ye."

"About Mrs. Hawkins—" the girl reminded her.

"Oh, yes, now if ye was a mind to find out about her, it wouldn't be so hard."

"How?"

"We hain't gone fur into the swamp yet. I could let ye out here on the bank and ye could slip back afoot to the bend in the channel."

"Where I'd be able to watch the house!"

"Ye got the idea, Penelope. All the while, I would keep goin' on in the boat until the sound o' the motor jest naturally died out. Then I could row back here and pick ye up agin."

"Mrs. Jones, you're the one who has a head on your shoulders!" Penny cried. "Let's do it!"

The widow brought the skiff alongside the bank, steadying it as the girl stepped ashore.

"Ye got a watch?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Then I'll meet ye right here in 'bout three-quarters of an hour. I kin keep track o' the time by lookin' at the sun."

"That may not give me enough time," Penny said anxiously.

"If yer late, I'll wait fer ye," the widow promised. "But try to be here. If ye hain't we may havter give up the trip, 'cause it hain't sensible startin' in late in the day."

"I'll be here," Penny assured her. "If nothing happens in three-quarters of an hour, I'll just give it up."

The boat, it's motor popping steadily, slipped away. Penny scrambled up the muddy back, and finding a well-trod path, walked rapidly toward the Hawkins' place.

Soon she came to the bend in the creek, and there paused. From afar, she could hear the retreating sound of the skiff's motor.

Through a break in the bushes, the girl peered toward the distant farmhouse. To her disappointment, the yard was now deserted, and Mrs. Hawkins was nowhere in sight.

"Maybe I was wrong," Penny thought. "I'd hate to waste all this valuable time."

For a half hour she waited. Twice Mrs. Hawkins came out of the house, once to gather in clothes from the line and the second time to obtain a pail of water.

"I guess my hunch was crazy," Penny told herself. "I'll have to be starting back to meet Mrs. Jones."

The sound of the motorboat now had died out completely, so the girl knew the widow already was on her way to their appointed meeting place.

Turning away from the bushes, Penny paused for one last glance at the farmhouse. The yard remained deserted. But as she sighed in disappointment, the kitchen door again flew open.

Mrs. Hawkins came outside and walked rapidly to the shed. She listened attentively for a moment. Then from a peg on the outside wall, she took down a big tin dishpan and a huge wooden mixing spoon.

Penny watched with mounting excitement. This was the moment for which she had waited!

Carefully, the farm woman looked about to be certain no one was nearby. Then with firm precision, she beat out a tattoo on the dishpan.

"It's a signal to someone in the swamp!" guessed Penny. "In code she is tapping out that Mrs. Jones and I are on our way into the interior!"

CHAPTER

20

TRAILING HOD HAWKINS

AFTER MRS. HAWKINS had pounded out the signal, she hung the dishpan on its peg once more, and went to the door of the shed. Without opening it, she spoke to someone inside the building. Penny was too far away to hear what she said.

In a minute, the woman turned away and vanished into the house.

Penny waited a little while to be certain Mrs. Hawkins did not intend to come outside again. Then, with an uneasy glance at her wrist watch, she stole away to rejoin Mrs. Jones.

The skiff was drawn up to shore by the time she reached the appointed meeting place.

"I was jest about to give you up," the widow remarked as the girl scrambled into the boat. "Did ye learn what ye wanted to know?"

Penny told her what she had seen.

" 'Pears you may be right about it bein a signal,"

the widow agreed thoughtfully. "We may be able to learn more too, 'cause whoever had his'n ears tuned to Ma Hawkins' signal may figure we're deep in the swamp by this time."

"Let's keep on the alert as we near Lookout Point," Penny urged.

Mrs. Jones nodded and silently dipped the paddle.

Soon they came within view of the point. Passing beneath an overhanging tree branch, the widow grasped it with one hand, causing the skiff to swing sideways into a shelter of leaves.

"See anyone, Penelope?" she whispered.

"Not a soul."

"Then maybe we was wrong about Ma Hawkins signalling anyone."

"But I do see a boat beached on the point!" Penny added. "And see! Someone is coming out of the bush now!"

"Hod Hawkins!"

Keeping quiet, the pair in the skiff waited to see what would happen.

Hod came down to the water's edge, peering with a puzzled expression along the waterway. He did not see the skiff, shielded by leaves and dense shade.

"Hit's all-fired queer," they heard him mutter. "I shore didn't see no boat pass here this mawnin'. But Maw musta seen one go by or she wouldn't heve pounded the pan."

Hod sat down on a log, watching the channel. Penny and Mrs. Jones remained where they were. Once the current, sluggish as it was, swung the skiff against a projecting tree root. The resulting jar and scraping sound seemed very loud to their ears. But the Hawkins youth did not hear.

Penny and the widow were becoming weary of sitting in such cramped positions under the tree branch. To their relief, Hod arose after a few minutes. Reaching into the hollow log, he removed a tin pan somewhat smaller than the dishpan Mrs. Hawkins had used a few minutes earlier.

"He's going to signal!" Penny whispered excitedly. "Either to his mother, or someone deeper in the swamp!"

Already Hod was beating out a pattern on the pan, very similar to the one the girl had heard before.

After a few minutes, the swamper thrust the pan back into its hiding place. He hesitated, and then to the surprise of Penny and Mrs. Jones, stepped into his boat.

"If he comes this way, he's certain to see us!" Penny thought uneasily.

With never a glance toward the leafy hideout, Hod shoved off, rowing deeper into the swamp.

"Dare we follow him?" whispered Penny.

"That's what I aim to do," the Widow Jones rejoined grimly. "I hain't afeared o' the likes o' Hod

Hawkins! Moreover, fer a long time, I been calculatin' to find out what takes him and Coon so offen into the swamp."

"You mean recently don't you, Mrs. Jones. Just since Danny Deevers escaped from prison?"

"I don't know nothin' about Danny Deevers," the widow replied as she picked up the paddle again. "I do know that the Hawkins' been up to mischief fer more'n a year."

"Then you must have an idea what that city truck was doing on the swamp road the other night."

"An idear—yes," agreed Mrs. Jones. "But I hain't sure, and until I am, I hain't makin' no accusations."

Now that Hod's boat was well away, the widow noiselessly sent the skiff forward.

"We kin follow close enough to jest about keep him in sight if we don't make no noise," she warned. "But we gotta be keerful."

Penny nodded and became silent.

Soon the channel was no more than a path through high water-grass and floating hyacinths. Hod propelled his boat with powerful muscles, alternating with forked pole and paddle. At times, when Penny took over to give the Widow Jones a "breather," she was hard pressed not to lose the trail.

"We're headin' straight fer Black Island, hit 'pears to me," Mrs. Jones whispered once. "The channel don't look the same though as when I was through

here last. But I reckon if we git lost we kin find our way out somehow."

Soon the skiff was inching through a labyrinth of floating hyacinths; there were few stretches of open water. Shallow channels to confuse the unwary, radiated out in a dozen directions, many of them with no outlets.

Always, however, before the hyacinths closed in, the Widow Jones was able to pick up the path through which Hod had passed.

"From the way he's racin' along, he's been this way plenty o' times," she remarked. "We're headin' fer Black Island right enough."

The sun now was high overhead, beating down on Penny's back and shoulders with uncomfortable warmth. Mrs. Jones brought out the lunch and a jug of water. One ate while the other rowed.

"We're most to Black Island," the widow informed presently. "If ye look sharp through the grass, ye can see thet point o' high land. Thet's the beginnin' o' the island—biggest one in the swamp."

"But where is Hod?"

"He musta pulled up somewheres in the bushes. We'll have to be keerful and go slow now or we'll be caught."

"Listen!" whispered Penny.

Although she could as yet see no one on the island, voices floated out across the water.

"We heerd yer signal, Hod," a man said, "but we hain't seen no one."

"A boat musta come through, or Maw wouldn't heve beat the pan."

"Whoever 'twas, they probably went off somewheres else," the other man replied. "Glad yer here anyhow, Hod. We got a lot o' work to do and ye can help us."

Hod's reply was inaudible, for obviously the men were moving away into the interior of the island.

"Thet was old Ezekiel talkin' to his son," the Widow Jones declared, although Penny already had guessed as much. "They've gone off somewheres, so if we're a mind to land, now's our only chance."

Penny gazed at her companion in surprise and admiration.

"You're not afraid?" she inquired softly.

"Maybe I am," the Widow Jones admitted. "But that hain't no excuse fer me turnin' tail! This here's a free country ain't it?"

She poled the skiff around the point to a thick clump of bushes. There she pulled up, and with Penny's help made the skiff secure to a tree root hidden from sight by overhanging branches.

Scrambling up the muddy bank, the pair paused to take bearings. Voices now had died away and to all appearances the island might have been deserted.

Treading with utmost caution, Penny and the

Widow Jones tramped along the shore until they came to a path. Abruptly, the girl halted, sniffing the air.

"I smell wood burning," she whispered. "From a campfire probably."

"An I smell somethin' more," added the Widow Jones grimly. "Cain't ye notice thet sickish, sweet odor in the air?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"We'll find out," replied Mrs. Jones. "But if we git cotched, I'm warnin' ye we won't never git away from here. Ye sure ye want to go on?"

"Very sure."

"Then come on. And be keerful not to crackle any leaves underfoot."

The path led to a low, tunnellike opening in the thicket. Penny, who again had taken the lead, crouched low, intending to crawl through.

Before she could do so, she heard a stifled cry behind her. Turning, she saw that Mrs. Jones had sagged to one knee, and her face was twisted with pain.

Penny ran to her. "You're hurt!" she whispered. "Bitten by a snake?"

Mrs. Jones shook her head, biting her lip to keep back the tears. She pointed to her ankle, caught beneath a tree root.

"I stumbled and wrenched it 'most off," she murmured. "Hit's a bad sprain and I'm afeared I can't go on."

CHAPTER

21

THE TUNNEL OF LEAVES

PENNY RAISED the woman to her feet, but as Mrs. Jones tried to take a step, she saw that the sprain indeed was a bad one.

Already the ankle was swelling and skin had been broken. At each attempted step, the widow winced with pain, suffering intensely.

"If I kin only git back to the boat, I'll be all right," she said, observing Penny's worried expression. "Drat it all! Jest when I wanted to find out what the Hawkins' are doin' on this island!"

Supporting much of the widow's weight on her shoulders, Penny helped her back to the skiff.

"I guess we may as well start back," she said, unable to hide her bitter disappointment.

The widow reached for an oar, then looked keenly at Penny and put it back again.

" 'Course it would be a risky thing fer ye to go on by yerself while I wait here in the boat—"

Penny's slumped shoulders straightened. Her blue eyes began to dance.

"You mean you don't mind waiting here while I see where that tunnel of leaves leads?" she demanded.

" 'Pears like we've come too fur not to find out what's goin' on. Think ye can git in there and back without being cotched?"

"I'm sure of it!"

The widow sighed. "I hain't sure of it, but you got more gumpshun than any other young'un I ever met. Go on if ye'r a-goin', and if anyone sees ye, light out fer the boat. I'll be ready to shove off."

"Mrs. Jones, you're a darling!" Penny whispered, giving the gnarled hand a quick pressure. "I'll make it all right!"

Moving directly to the thicket, she dropped on all fours and started through the leafy tunnel where Hod had disappeared. The sweetish odor now was much plainer than before.

She had crawled only a few feet, when a hand reached out of nowhere and grasped her shoulder.

Penny whirled around, expecting to see a member of the Hawkins' family. For a moment she saw no one, and then from the thicket beside the tunnel, a figure became visible. The hold on her shoulder relaxed.

"Who are you?" she demanded in a whisper.

"Friend."

"Then show yourself!"

The leaves rustled, and a dark-haired lad with tangled curls crawled into the tunnel beside her. His shoes were ripped, his clothing dirty and in tatters. A rifle was grasped in his hand.

"Bada men," he warned, jerking his head in the direction Penny had been crawling. "Mucha better go back boat."

"Who are you and why do you warn me?" Penny asked, deeply puzzled.

The boy did not reply.

Light dawned suddenly upon Penny. "You're the one who saved me from the boar!"

The boy's quick grin was acknowledgment he had fired the shot.

"But why did you run away?" Penny asked. "Why didn't you wait and let me thank you for saving my life?"

"You giva me to police maybe," replied the boy in broken English. "I staya here—starva first!"

"Who are you?"

"Name no matter."

Penny's mind had been working swiftly. She was convinced the boy who had saved her also was the one who had stolen Trapper Joe's gun. Evidently, he had needed it to survive in the swamp. He was thin and his eyes had a hungry look, she noted.

"How did you get to this island?" she inquired. "Do you have a boat?"

"Make-a raft." The boy's eyes darted down the leafy tunnel. "No good here," he said, seizing Penny's arm and pulling her back into the thicket. "Someone-a come!"

Scarcely had the pair flattened themselves on the ground than Ezekiel Hawkins crawled out through the tunnel, pushing his gun ahead of him. Standing upright not three feet from Penny and her companion, he gazed sharply about.

"Thought I heerd voices," he muttered.

Penny held her breath, knowing that if the swamper should walk down the shore even a dozen yards, he would see the Widow Jones waiting in the skiff.

To her great relief, Ezekiel moved in the opposite direction. After satisfying himself that no boat approached the island, he returned through the tunnel and disappeared.

"What's going on back in there?" Penny whispered as soon as it was safe to ask.

"Bada men," her companion said briefly.

"You're driving me to distraction!" Penny muttered, losing patience. "Do those swampers know you're here on the island?"

The boy shook his tangled curls, grinning broadly. "Chasa me once. No catch."

"You're Italian, aren't you?" Penny asked suddenly.

A guarded look came over the lad's sun-tanned face. His brown eyes lost some of their friendliness.

"Now I have it!" Penny exclaimed before he could speak. "You're Antonio Tienta, wanted by Immigration authorities for slipping into this country illegally!"

The boy did not deny the accusation, and the half-frightened, defiant look he gave her, confirmed that she had struck upon the truth.

"I no go back!" he muttered. "I starva first!"

"Don't become so excited, or those men will hear you and we'll both be caught," Penny warned. "Tell me about yourself, Tony. I already know a little."

"How mucha you know?" he asked cautiously.

"That you acted as a guide to G.I.'s in Italy and stowed aboard a troopship coming to this country. Even now, I guess authorities aren't certain how you slipped past New York officials."

"No trouble," boasted the lad. "On ship my friendsa the G.I.'s they feeda me. We dock New York; I hide under bunk; all G.I.'s leava boat. Boat go to other dock. Sailor friend giva me clothes. Sailors leave-a boat. I slippa out. No one geta wise."

"Then where did you go?"

"Stay in-a New York only two—three days. Go hitchhike into country. Work-a on farm. No like it. Hear Immigration men-a come, so I go. Come-a one day to swamp. Good place; I stay."

"You've not had an easy time keeping alive in this dismal place," Penny said sympathetically. "Isn't that Trapper Joe's gun?"

"Steal-a one night," the boy agreed. "Give back some-a time."

Penny studied the youth with growing concern. "Tony," she said, "you can't hope to stay here long. The only sensible thing is to give yourself up."

"No! I die first! American best country in all-a the world! No one ever take-a me back!"

"But you can't expect to elude Immigration officials very long. If you give yourself up, they might be lenient with you."

"They send-a me back," Tony said stubbornly. "I stay right-a here!"

"To starve? You're hungry now, aren't you?"

"Sure. But in Italy I hungry many times-a too."

"Tony, we'll talk about this later," Penny sighed. "Right now, I want to learn what's going on here at the island. Know anything about it?"

"Sure," the boy grinned. "Know plenty."

"Then suppose you tell me, Tony."

"I show-a you," the boy offered.

Avoiding the leafy tunnel, he led Penny in a half circle through another section of dense thicket.

Soon he motioned for her to drop on her knees.

The sickish odor rising through the trees now was very disagreeable again.

A few yards farther on, Tony halted. Still lying flat on his stomach, he carefully pulled aside the bushes so that his companion might see.

CHAPTER

22

HELP FROM TONY

THROUGH THE leaves, Penny saw a fairly large clearing. Three men, Ezekiel Hawkins and his two sons, were squatted about a big hardwood fire over which was a large copper cooker.

A pipe extended above the cover, connected with a series of coils immersed in a barrel of cold water.

"A still!" the girl whispered. "They're making alcohol here and selling it in the city! That's what those containers held that were trucked away!"

"Make-a the stuff every day," volunteered Tony. "I watch—sometimes I steal-a the lunch. They very mad but no catch."

"They're probably afraid you'll tell revenue officers," Penny whispered.

From one of the barrels, Coon had taken a dipper filled with the pale fluid. As he drank deeply from it, his father said sharply:

"Thet's enough, Coon! We gotta git this stuff made

an moved out o' here tonight, and ye won't be fitten."

"What's yer rush, Pappy? We got termorrer, hain't we?" Coon sat down, and bracing his back against a tree trunk, yawned drowsily.

"Ye want to be caught by them lousy revenooers?"

"There hain't no danger. Hain't we got a foolproof system? If anyone starts this way, Maw'll spot 'em and give us the signal."

"Folkses is gittin' wise, and we hain't none too popular hereabouts. We're moving this stuff out tonight."

"Jest as you say, Pappy." Coon stirred reluctantly.

"An we hain't operatin' the still no more till things quiets down. I don't like it that gal snoopin around here, claimin' to be lookin' fer her dawg."

"Ye should have kilt the dawg, stead o' keepin' him," Hod spoke up as he dumped a sack of mash into a tub. "Tole ye it would make us trouble."

"Yer always tellin me!" Ezekiel retorted. "Thet dog's handy to heve here, an I never was one to kill a helpless animal without cause. Now git to yer work, and let me do the thinkin' fer this outfit!"

Penny's curiosity now had been fully satisfied as to the illegal business in which the Hawkins' family had engaged, but she also felt a little disappointed.

She had hoped the men would speak of Danny Deevers, perhaps revealing his hideout. The convict was nowhere to be seen, and there was no evidence he ever had been on Black Island.

Not wishing to leave Mrs. Jones too long alone in the boat, Penny presently motioned to Tony that she had seen and heard enough.

Inch by inch, they crept backwards away from the tiny clearing.

Then suddenly Penny stopped, for Ezekiel was speaking again:

"We gotta do something about Danny and git him off our hands."

Penny instantly became all ears, listening intently to Coon's reply:

"Now ye'r talkin', Pappy. Takin' him in was a big mistake. Hit's apt ter land us in jail if them city officers come snoopin' around here agin."

"There wouldn't have been no risk, if Hod and Danny hadn't taken the widder's car and drive into town. Didn't ye have no sense, Hod?"

"Danny wanted to go," Hod whined. "How was we ter know another car was goin' to smash into us? Thet fool newspaper camera man an' the girl had to be there!"

"That wasn't the wust," Ezekiel went on as he fed the fire with chips. "Then ye follered 'em to the theater!"

"Danny said we had ter git the picture or they'd print it in the newspaper."

"But did ye git the picture?"

"No," Hod growled.

"Instead o' that, ye let Danny git into a fight."

" 'Twasn't no fight and nobody knew it was him. He seen an enemy o' hisn go into the building. I tried ter talk him out o' it, but he wouldn't listen. He crawled in through a window, and slugged the feller."

"He did have sense enough to git rid o' the car, but ye shouldn't have left it so close to our place," Ezekiel pointed out. "That newspaper gal's been out here twict now, and she's catchin' on!"

"She's only a gal," Hod said carelessly. "Ye do too much worryin', Pappy."

"I do the thinkin' fer this family. An' I say things is gittin' too hot fer comfort. We gotta git rid o' Danny tonight."

"How ye aimin' ter do it, Pappy?" inquired Coon. "Be ye fergittin' he's got $50,000 hid away somewheres an' he hain't give us our slice yet?"

"Fer all his promises, maybe he don't calculate ever to give us our cut! Ever think o' that?"

"Danny would double cross us if he got the chanst," Hod agreed. "Maybe ye'r right, Pappy!"

"Doggone tootin', I am! We git rid o' him tonight, soon's we git back from this island. But first we make him tell where he hid the money!"

"How we gonna do it, Pappy?" asked Coon.

"Hain't figured fer sure, but he's the same as our

prisoner, ain't he? If we was to turn him over to the police, claimin' we found him hidin' out in the swamp, he couldn't prove no different."

"And we'd git $10,000 reward!" Hod added. "We could use thet money!"

"I hain't one to double cross a pal if it can be helped," Ezekiel amended hastily. "Now if Danny's a mind to tell where he hid the money, and split, we'll help him git out o' here tonight."

"And if he won't cough up?"

"We'll turn him over to police and claim the reward."

To Penny, it now was clear Hod Hawkins had been with Danny Deevers at the time Jerry was slugged. Also, the conversation made it evident the escaped convict had sought a hideout somewhere near if not in the swamp.

Tensely, the girl waited for further details of the escape plan, but none were forthcoming. The three men applied themselves to their work and said no more.

"My best bet is to get away from here fast and notify police!" Penny thought.

Noiselessly, she and Tony retreated through the thicket to a shoreline some distance away.

"Listen, Tony!" Penny said hurriedly. "I've got to go away for awhile! Will you stay here and keep watch of these men for me?"

"I stay," the boy promised soberly.

"I'll come back as soon as I can. And Tony! Please don't run away. I want to do something for you—perhaps I can."

"No go back to Italy," the boy said firmly. "Stay-a here—you come back. Then go far away. No trust pol-eese."

Penny dared not take time to try to convince the youth of the folly of fleeing from Immigration authorities. Saying goodbye, she ran to the boat where the Widow Jones anxiously awaited her.

"Shove off!" she ordered tersely. "I've seen plenty! I'll tell you about it, once we're away from here!"

Mrs. Jones gave a mighty push with her pole, and the skiff floated out of its hiding place into the hyacinth-clogged channel.

"How is your foot?" Penny inquired. "Better let me paddle."

"It hain't hurtin' so much now," the widow replied without giving up the paddle. "I'll steer until we're out o' these floatin' hyacinth beds."

"One place looks exactly like another to me," Penny said anxiously. "So many false channels!"

"Ye git a feel fer it after awhile. There's a current to follow, but it's mighty faint."

"We must get back as fast as we can," Penny urged, glancing nervously over her shoulder toward Black Is-

land. In terse sentences she told of her meeting with Tony and all they had seen in the clearing.

"So the Hawkins' are runnin' a still!" commented the widow. "Humph! Jest as I figured, only I didn't dast say so without proof."

"The important thing is they're hiding Danny Deevers! Where they're keeping him will be for the police to discover as soon as they arrest Ezekiel and his sons."

"I'll git ye back fast," the widow promised grimly. "Soon's we git out o' these beds and away from the island, I kin switch on the motor."

Safely out of sight of the island, the couple found themselves in a labyrinth of floating hyacinths with no clearly defined channel. The Widow Jones tried a half dozen of them, each time being forced to return to a point she could identify as their starting place.

"Penelope, I can't seem to find the main channel," she confessed at last. " 'Pears like we're lost."

"Oh, we can't be!" Penny exclaimed. "We must get back quickly!"

"I'm a-tryin' hard as I kin," the widow said doggedly.

"Let me paddle for awhile," Penny offered. "Your ankle is hurting and you're tired. Just tell me which way to go."

Mrs. Jones indicated a channel which opened in a wide sweep. But before Penny had paddled far, it

played out. The sun, sinking lower in the sky, warned the pair how fast time was passing.

For another hour they sought desperately to find the exit channel. Although they took turns at paddling, and used the motor whenever the passageway was not too clogged, they soon became exhausted.

"It hain't no use," the widow said at last. "We're tuckered out, and we're goin' around in circles. We'll pull up on shore and take a little rest."

Penny nodded miserably.

Herons flew lazily over as the couple pulled the boat out on the soft muck. Seeking a high point of land, the widow flung herself flat on her back to rest.

For a time, Penny sat beside her, thinking over everything that had occurred. It was bitterly disappointing to realize that due purely to a stroke of bad luck, Danny Deevers undoubtedly would elude police.

"Mrs. Jones and I may not find our way out of here in twenty-four hours!" she thought. "By that time, the Hawkins' family will have helped him escape!"

Tormented by weariness, Penny stretched out beside the widow. Insects annoyed her for awhile. Then she dozed off.

Much later when the girl awoke, she saw that her companion still slept. The shadow of dusk already was heavy upon the swamp.

Sitting up, Penny gazed resentfully across the water at an almost solid sea of floating plants.

"Such miserable luck!" she muttered. "Of all times to be lost!"

Penny's gaze remained absently upon the hyacinth bed. The plants slowly were drifting westward. At first their movement signified nothing to the girl. Then suddenly, she sprang to her feet.

Excitedly she shook Mrs. Jones by the arm. "The channel!" she cried. "I can see it now! If we move fast, we still may get out of the swamp before night!"

CHAPTER

23

LOST IN THE HYACINTHS

MRS. JONES shaded her eyes from the slanting rays of the low-hung sun to gaze for a long moment at the almost motionless hyacinth bed blanketing the water.

"Right ye are, Penelope!" she exclaimed jubilantly. "The channel's plain to see now! Help me git to the boat, and we'll be out o' this tangle."

Once in the skiff, the widow again seized the paddle.

"We gotta inch our way along fer a little," she explained. "If we don't foller the drift o' the bed, we'll be lost agin and that hain't smart."

Steadily the widow shoved the little boat through the water plants, seldom hesitating in choice of the channel.

"I got the feel o' it agin!" she declared happily. "We'll be out o' this in no time!"

However, dark shadows were deepening to blackness when the boat finally came into water open enough to permit use of the motor. Propelled by the

engine, the skiff presently approached Lookout Point.

"Let's paddle from here," proposed Penny. "Ezekiel and his sons may be out of the swamp by this time. We don't want them to see us or guess where we've been."

Mrs. Jones shut off the motor and with a tired sigh, offered the paddle to Penny. The channel now was plainly marked and easy to follow, even in semi-darkness. Whenever the girl hesitated, the widow told her which way to steer.

"We're out of it now," Mrs. Jones said as lights of the Hawkins' farmhouse twinkled through the trees. "Reckon Trapper Joe's fit to be tied, we been gone so long!"

Penny allowed the skiff to drift with the current. As it floated past the Hawkins' dock, loud voices came from the direction of the woodshed.

"Sounds like an argument goin' on," observed the widow.

Penny brought the skiff in and made fast to the dock.

"What ye aimin' to do?" the widow inquired in surprise.

"Wait here!" Penny whispered. "I have a hunch what's going on and I must find out!" Before Mrs. Jones could protest, she slipped away into the darkness.

Stealthily the girl approached the woodshed. A

voice which she recognized as Ezekiel's, now plainly could be heard.

"Danny, we've fed ye and kept ye here fer days in this woodshed, and it hain't safe!" the speaker said. "Ye gotta git out tonight—now—through the swamp. The river'll take ye out the other end, and ye maybe kin git out o' the state."

"And maybe I'll be caught!" the other voice replied. Penny knew it was Danny Deevers who spoke. "I'm staying right here!"

"Coon and Hod'll guide ye through the swamp, so ye'll be safe enough till ye git to the other side," Ezekiel argued. "We hain't keepin' ye here another day. You got clothes and food and a good chanst to git away."

Penny crept close to the wall of the woodshed. Peering through a small, dirty window on the far side she saw four men seated on kegs in a room dimly lighted by a lantern.

The man facing her plainly was Danny Deevers. Opposite him were Ezekiel and his two sons, both armed with rifles.

"Hain't no use talkin' any more," Ezekiel said flatly. "Ye'r leavin' here tonight, Danny. Maw's fixin' ye a lunch to take."

"Paw, hain't you forgittin' something?" Coon prodded his father.

"Hain't fergittin' nothin', Coon. Danny, 'fore you

go, there's a matter o' money to be settled between us. Ye got $50,000 hid somewheres close, and we want our cut fer hidin' ye out from the police."

Danny laughed unpleasantly.

"You leeches won't get a penny! Not a penny! No one but me knows where that money is, and I'm not telling!"

"Then I calculate Hod and Coon cain't guide ye through the swamp tonight," Ezekiel said coolly. "We got word today the police got a hint ye'r here. We'll help 'em, by turning you in. Hod, git to the phone and call Sheriff Burtwell. Tell 'im we cotched this feller hidin' in the swamp."

"You betcha!" Hod said with alacrity.

"Wait!" Danny stopped him before he could reach the door. "How much of a cut do you dirty blackmailers want?"

"We don't like them words, Danny," Ezekiel said. "All we ask is a fair amount fer the risk we been takin' keepin' ye here."

"How much?"

"A third cut."

"I'll give you $10,000."

" 'Tain't enough."

"You'll not get another cent. Take it or leave it. Turn me in if you want to! You'll involve yourself because I'll swear you hid me here."

"We hain't aimin' to be hard on ye, Danny," Ezekiel said hastily. "If we was to agree to the $10,000, kin ye deliver tonight?"

"In fifteen minutes!"

"Ye hain't got the money on ye or hid in the woodshed!"

"No."

"But it's somewheres close. I knowed that."

"If I give you $10,000, you'll guide me through the swamp and help me get away?"

"We will," Ezekiel promised.

"Then get a spade," Danny directed. "The money's buried under a fence post by the creek. I hid it there a year ago before they sent me up. Marked the post with a V-shaped slash of my jackknife."

"Git a spade, Hod," Ezekiel ordered.

Penny waited for no more. Stealing away, she ran to the boat where Mrs. Jones awaited her.

"No questions now!" she said tersely. "Just go as fast as you can and telephone the police! Also call my father, Anthony Parker at the *Riverview Star!* Ask him to come here right away and bring help!"

"You've found Danny Deevers!" the widow guessed, preparing to cast off.

"Yes, and maybe the stolen money! But there's not a second to lose! Let me have your knife, and go as fast as you can!"

Without questioning the odd request, Mrs. Jones gave her the knife and seized a paddle. Penny shoved the skiff far out into the stream.

Then she turned and with a quick glance toward the woodshed, darted to the nearby fence. Rapidly she examined the wooden posts, searching for a V-shaped mark. She could find no slashes of any kind. At any moment she knew the men might emerge from the woodshed and see her.

"Somehow I've got to keep them here until Mrs. Jones brings the police!" she thought. "But how?"

Suddenly an idea came to her. It might not work, but there was an outside chance it would. With desperate haste, she slashed several posts with V-shaped marks.

"That may confuse them for a few minutes," she reasoned. "But not for long."

The door of the woodshed now had opened. Penny dropped flat in the tall weeds near the fence.

Without seeing her, the four men came with a spade and began to inspect posts scarcely a dozen yards from where the girl lay.

"Here's a marked one!" called Hod as he found one of the posts Penny had slashed.

In the darkness the men did not notice that the cut was a fresh one. They began to dig. Silently the work went on until a large hole had been excavated.

"Where's the money?" Ezekiel demanded. "Danny, if ye'r pullin' a fast one—"

"I tell you I buried it under a post!" the other insisted. "Thought it was farther down the fence, but this one was marked."

Ezekiel flashed his lantern full on the post which now had been tilted far over on its side.

"The post's marked," he confirmed. "Fresh new slashes."

"Let's see!" Danny exclaimed. He examined the marking briefly and straightened up. "I never made those cuts! Someone's tricked me!"

Excited by the discovery, the men now moved from post to post. Other slashes were found.

"Here's the one with my mark!" Danny cried, pointing to a post close to where Penny lay hidden. "Who slashed these others? Someone must have learned where I buried the money!"

"It does look kinda bad," said Ezekiel. "But there hain't been no diggin' by this post. Git busy, boys!"

Taking turns, Coon and Hod fell to with the spade. Soon they had uncovered three large tin cans filled with bank notes.

"It's all here!" Danny said jubilantly. "Every dollar!"

Ezekiel blew out the lantern light, looking carefully about the yard. "There hain't no time to divide the

money now," he said. "We gotta git you through the swamp, Danny, before them snoopin' police come around. Bring the cans and come on! We're moving out o' here right now!"

Hod shuffled off to get the boat ready as the others each picked up a can and followed quickly.

CHAPTER

24

UNDER THE FENCE POST

PENNY WAS tormented with worry as she saw the men walk hurriedly to the creek where they launched a flat-bottomed boat belonging to Ezekiel. Soon the craft was lost in the blackness of the swamp channel.

"There goes my chance to catch Danny and recover the stolen money!" she thought. "Oh, what can I do to prevent them from getting away?"

Another boat had been tied up at the dock, but Penny knew she never would dare enter the swamp alone at night. In any case, what chance would she have against four armed men?

"If only Mrs. Jones hadn't hurt her ankle!" she thought. "It will take her a long while to reach a telephone, and help may not get here for an hour!"

As Penny stood gazing gloomily toward the swamp, a shaft of light cut fleetingly across the water. The flash came from the headbeam of a car swinging up the lane to the Hawkins' house.

Not knowing who the arrivals might be, the girl stepped behind a tree to wait. Soon the car came closer, halting with a jerk.

From the sedan stepped Mr. Parker, Salt, and Jerry Livingston. Scarcely believing her eyes, Penny ran to meet them.

"Oh, Dad!" she cried. "You did get Mrs. Jones' message!"

"Message?" he inquired. "Why, no! We were worried because you had been gone so long, so we came out here to find you. What's this all about?"

Penny rapidly told of Danny's flight into the swamp with the stolen money.

"If Mrs. Jones reaches a phone, police should get here any minute!" she added.

"In the meantime, we can't let those men escape!" Mr. Parker exclaimed. "Salt, you stay here and wait for the police. If they don't come in ten minutes, go after them!"

"Sure, Chief!"

"Jerry, you come with me," the publisher directed, untying the boat at the dock. "We'll try to keep those men in sight and mark the way for police to follow."

As Penny followed Jerry into the boat, her father protested quickly:

"Penny, you know you can't go! Danny Deevers is a desperate character."

"If you expect to capture him, you'll have to take

me, Dad. They'll probably follow the main channel to Black Island and beyond. You'll be lost before you've covered half the distance."

"All right, come along," Mr. Parker agreed unwillingly.

The boat shoved off into the cool night.

Fairly certain the Hawkins' boat would pass Lookout Point, Penny directed her father and Jerry to row toward it. Soon she caught a glimpse of a moving light through the trees.

"That's their boat!" she exclaimed. "Ezekiel must have lighted his lantern again!"

Scarcely had she spoken than those in the Parker craft were startled to hear a metallic pounding sound from the direction of the Hawkins' farmhouse.

"The dishpan signal!" Penny cried in dismay. "We forgot about Mrs. Hawkins! Evidently she saw us leave the dock and is warning her menfolks! Now they'll know someone is following them!"

Mr. Parker's face became very grave as the girl revealed the significance of the signal. Penny also told him what she and Mrs. Jones had learned on Black Island.

"Unarmed, we've no chance to capture those men," he commented. "Our best bet is to keep them in sight, marking the trail well for police to follow."

"And hope they do," Jerry added grimly.

Breaking overhanging tree limbs, and slashing trunks

to blaze the trail, the party passed Lookout Point.

When they were perhaps twenty yards beyond the isle, a bullet suddenly whizzed through the trees, only a few feet above their heads. The shot had been fired from the island.

"Duck low!" Mr. Parker ordered. "They've taken refuge there!"

As the trio remained motionless, another bullet whined over their heads.

"Dad, it's only a trick to divert us!" Penny whispered. "One of the Hawkins' boys probably has stayed on the island, but the others have gone on! See through the trees!"

Jerry and Mr. Parker peered where she pointed and caught the brief flash of lantern light.

"You're right!" the publisher agreed. "Row on, Jerry! We're practically out of range of Lookout Point now."

The boat pushed on. A light mist was rising from the water and the night was very dark. Shielded by the blackness, the trio slipped away without becoming the target for another bullet.

"We've got to keep that other boat in sight!" Mr. Parker said grimly. "If we lose it, we may never find our way out of this place!"

"And if we catch up, we may never be allowed to get out!" Jerry observed.

Penny, who scarcely had taken her eyes from the moving point of light ahead, now exclaimed:

"They've blown out the lantern!"

"Then they may have seen us," Mr. Parker muttered. "If only we were armed!"

Cautiously, the party proceeded. A few minutes later as the boat passed a high point of land several hundred yards deeper in the swamp, another bullet whizzed dangerously close overhead.

"Where'd that come from?" Mr. Parker demanded, shielding Penny with his body.

Jerry pointed to the high point of land on the right hand side of the channel. "Those birds must have pulled up there and hope to pick us off!" he whispered.

Still another bullet whined close over their heads, splashing as it struck the water.

Hurriedly Jerry steered the boat into a clump of bushes. All remained motionless and silent.

Bullets kept splattering the water, though farther away.

"We're in a pocket!" Mr. Parker fumed. "They can pick us off almost at will if we stay here!"

"What's our move, Chief?" Jerry asked anxiously.

"Let's back-track to the farm and await police. It's the only thing we can do."

As a lull came in the firing, Jerry shoved off and rowed rapidly back toward Lookout Point. All

crouched low in the boat, but no shots were fired at them.

"They're satisfied we've turned back," Mr. Parker said. "That was what they wanted."

However, as Lookout Point loomed up, the party was disconcerted to see a tall, lean figure silhouetted there.

"Stay where ye be, or I'll fire!" the man shouted. "If ye try to pass, I'll sink ye'r boat!"

"It's Ezekiel!" Penny whispered.

Mr. Parker signaled Jerry to row back out of range. "We've trapped ourselves between two fires!" he muttered in disgust. "Ezekiel stayed here on purpose to guard the channel while the others make their getaway."

"Danny could be captured easily if only we could get word to Salt and the police," Jerry added.

Penny and her father nodded gloomily. Salt, they knew, would follow their trail into the swamp as soon as police reached the Hawkins' farm. But Ezekiel from his point of vantage, would fire upon them before they realized they were running into danger.

"We could chance it and try to push through," Jerry proposed.

"Ezekiel's not bluffing," Mr. Parker replied. "Those first shots were a warning. If we attempt to pass now, he may shoot to kill."

"There's one way we might bring help," Jerry said,

staring thoughtfully at the grim figure guarding the channel.

"How?" Penny demanded eagerly.

"You and your father would have to wait on the bank and let me take the boat."

"Too risky," Mr. Parker said. "You never could get through."

"I'd try an old trick," the reporter explained. "When Ezekiel starts shooting, I'll upset the boat and float beneath it until I'm past the point. I'm a good swimmer and can hold my breath a long while. Anyway, after the boat is upset, there will be a pocket of air beneath it."

"It might not work."

"Let me try it. Unless we get word through, Danny Deevers is certain to escape."

After lengthy whispered debate, Mr. Parker reluctantly agreed to the plan. Retreating beyond Ezekiel's range of vision, the boat brought up on shore where Penny and her father alighted.

"Wait right here!" Jerry directed. "I'll be back for you in a few minutes!"

Boldly the reporter pushed off alone in the boat, drifting down channel. Before he had gone many yards, Ezekiel challenged him.

"Ye come another foot, and I'm lettin' ye have it!"

Jerry shouted an insult. But as Ezekiel's gun spat, he upset the boat, disappearing beneath it.

"Oh, Dad!" Penny murmured anxiously, watching the craft float slowly downstream past the point. "Was Jerry really hit?"

"I don't think so."

"What if Ezekiel fires again?"

"He can't harm Jerry now unless he's forced to come up for air."

Anxiously the trio watched the overturned boat. Unless Jerry had found the pocket of air, they knew not even an expert swimmer could remain so long underwater.

Finally the boat was beyond their range of vision, blotted out by darkness.

"Jerry has nerve!" Mr. Parker commented. "He's safely through now."

Nervously the publisher and Penny kept attentive watch of Lookout Point, fearful lest Ezekiel launch a boat and try to capture them. To their intense relief, the swamper made no such move. Occasionally, they caught brief glimpses of him as he shifted his position.

Directing all their attention upon Ezekiel, Penny and her father paid less heed to the channel. Near them was a passage so narrow a boatman could have reached out to touch bushes on either side.

A slight rustling sound close by suddenly startled Penny.

"What was that, Dad?" she whispered.

"Only the wind," he reassured her. "Ezekiel's still over there on the point. We're safe enough."

Even as he made the observation, a boat moved out from behind the screen of leaves. Penny and her father found themselves gazing directly into the barrel of a gun.

"Safe, are ye?" Coon Hawkins shouted in glee. "We got ye now, ye sneakin' snoopers! Ye won't do no more spyin' in this swamp!"

With him in the boat were his brother and Danny Deevers.

"Git in!" Coon ordered sharply.

"What will you do with us?" Mr. Parker asked, trying to stall for time.

"We're takin' ye to Black Island," Coon replied, prodding the publisher with his gun. "Move!"

One glance at the grim, determined faces of the men convinced Mr. Parker and Penny it would be folly to resist. Silently they entered the boat.

Hod pushed off and the craft moved noiselessly away into the night.

CHAPTER

25

OUTWITTED

FOR AN endless time, it seemed, the party moved deeper and deeper into the swamp. As the night became cool, Penny shivered and leaned close to her father.

Worn out, she slumped against his shoulder and finally dropped into a light sleep. When she opened her eyes, a pale moon had risen over the treetops, lighting the way.

At last, the boat brought up in a cove at Black Island.

"We're leavin' ye here," Coon informed the prisoners. "Maybe ye'll be found tomorrer or next week after we're safe away. If not, well hit's jest too bad!"

Penny and her father were hustled ashore. Despite vigorous struggles, Mr. Parker then was bound by Coon and Hod and lashed with his back to a tree. Before Penny could be treated likewise, a dog began to bark.

"It's Bones!" she cried. "You have him here on the island!"

"Sure, we got him," agreed Hod indifferently.

Penny loudly called the dog's name and he bounded through the brush toward her. His long hair was matted with burs, but he seemed in good health and well fed.

Before Penny could get her hands on him, Coon seized and tossed the dog into the boat.

"Please let me keep Bones!" she pleaded.

"Yeah, leave the dog on the island," growled Danny Deevers. "He'll be a bother to us."

"Git the dog then, gal," commanded Coon.

Penny scrambled aboard the Hawkins' boat. Bones had crawled far forward.

As she bent to gather him into her arms, her hand encountered a gunny sack. Inside were wrapped three hard, round objects.

"The cans of stolen money!" Penny thought, her pulse jumping.

Without considering the punishment that might be meted out to her, she seized the sack.

"Hey!" shouted Coon furiously. "Drop those cans!"

He sprang aboard, intending to strike her a stunning blow. Penny leaped for shore, but the boat shot from beneath her feet.

Misbalanced, it went over, tumbling Coon and herself into the water.

But as Penny went down, she clung fast to the cans of money. Fortunately, the muddy water was shallow. Her feet touched bottom and she came up sputtering.

Hod and Danny started for the boat on a run, intending to seize her. Suddenly, they halted, listening intently.

"What was that?" Danny demanded. "Thought I heard the splash of a paddle!"

"Two boats are coming!" Hod cried hoarsely. "Police!"

"Come on!" ordered Danny, seizing one end of the overturned boat. "Help me right this! We'll still get away! The girl goes with us as a hostage!"

Hod grasped Penny's arm, while his brother aided Danny with the boat.

"No go!" ordered a cool voice from the thicket. "I gotta you covered!"

As the three men whirled around, Tony, rifle in hand, came out of the deep shadows.

"Stand-a by tree!" he commanded, motioning with the gun. "Keep-a hands up!"

Sullenly the three men obeyed. Tony guarded them closely until policemen swarmed over the island.

In the first boat were Salt, Jerry and several officers.

Behind came a second boat, also loaded with policemen.

Danny, Hod and Coon quickly were handcuffed and placed under heavy guard. Tony then helped Penny release her father.

"What about Ezekiel?" the publisher asked. "We ought to get him too!"

Jerry revealed that the swamper already had been taken prisoner at Lookout Island. Two policemen had remained behind to guard both him and his wife.

"Oh, Jerry! I'm so glad you got through safely!" Penny declared. "Did you have any trouble?"

"Not a bit," he replied. "When I reached the farmhouse, police already were there. Mrs. Jones had telephoned them."

"We arrested Mrs. Hawkins," Salt took up the story. "Then we captured Ezekiel at Lookout Point, and followed your boat here. Most of the time we had you in sight, though from a long distance."

Penny was greatly relieved to be able to turn over the three cans of stolen money to police officers. By lantern light a hasty count was made and it was disclosed that a sizeable portion of the funds were missing.

However, when Danny Deevers, Hod, and Coon were searched, a large roll of bills was found in the escaped convict's pocket.

"This should account for it all," said the police officer, taking charge of the money and adding it to the other. "So you were trying to double-cross your pals, Danny? Figured on keeping the lion's share!"

Danny glared at the officer, refusing to answer.

"So you got nothing to say, eh?" the officer prodded. "Maybe you'll be in a more talkative mood when we get you back to the pen. You'll do double time for skipping out!"

Danny's sullen gaze fastened briefly on Jerry Livingston.

"I got only one regret!" he muttered. "I wish I'd slugged that guy harder when I had the chance!"

"May I ask the prisoners a question or two?" Penny asked the officer in charge.

"Sure, go ahead," he nodded. "If you get anything out of 'em, you're good."

Penny knew that Danny, a hardened criminal, would never give her any information, so she centered her attention upon Hod and Coon.

At first, they only eyed her sullenly, refusing to speak. But after she had pointed out that a more cooperative attitude might bring a lighter sentence, they showed a little interest.

"How did you come to be mixed up with Danny?" she asked. "Were you all together in the big bank robbery?"

The question drew fire from Hod.

"No, we weren't!" he shouted. "We never even knowed where Danny hid the money until tonight!"

"Then why were you so willing to hide and help him?"

" 'Cause him and Paw always was good friends! Danny come here, saying the cops was after him and would we give him some clothes and hide him fer a day or two? So like fools we was, we took him in and kept him in the woodshed. It would have been safe enough if you hadn't come snoopin' around!"

"No doubt you all would have gone free if you hadn't made the mistake of keeping Louise's dog," Penny retorted. "However, you seem to forget you were operating a still illegally."

"Anyone else in on that business?" the policeman cut in. "How'd they market the stuff?"

"Through a trucker at Hartwell City," Penny exclaimed. "I think they called him Ike."

"Too bad the bird will go free, while these eggs do a stretch in the pen," commented the policeman. "You can depend on it though, they'll never do the smart thing and turn him in."

"Oh, wouldn't we?" growled Hod. "He was no pal o' ourn!"

"Would it git us a lighter stretch if we was to turn him in?" asked Coon craftily.

"It might."

"His name's Ike Glanzy and he stays mostly at the

Devon Club in Hartwell City," Hod volunteered.

"We'll pick him up," said the policeman. "Depend on it, he'll be behind bars before another twenty-four hours. Now let's get out of here!"

As the boats began to load for the return trip through the swamp, Penny glanced anxiously about the tiny clearing.

"Where's Tony?" she asked.

No one had seen the Italian lad in the last few minutes. Unnoticed, he had slipped away into the interior of the island.

"We can't leave without Tony!" Penny protested. "He's afraid he'll be sent back to Italy, so he's run off somewhere!"

"He can't have gone far," said Salt. "We should be able to find him."

However, an intensive search of the bushes nearby did not reveal the missing youth. At last, in desperation, Penny called his name several times.

"Please, Tony, give yourself up!" she pleaded. "You won't be sent back to Italy! I'm sure of it! Please come out of hiding!"

"If that appeal doesn't fetch him, nothing will," said Salt. "We've held up the party too long now, Penny. We've got to shove off."

Penny nodded disconsolately. When the photographer took her arm and started back toward the waiting boats, she did not resist.

But after they had gone a few yards, she abruptly halted.

"Tony *is* close by!" she insisted. "I can *feel* that he's watching us now! Listen! Don't you hear the bushes rustling?"

"I do hear something. Maybe it's only an animal."

"Tony," Penny made one last appeal, "if you're back there in the dark, please come out. Don't you understand? You were a hero tonight—you saved the day by popping out of the bushes at just the right moment. Please don't fail me now."

The leaves were stirring again. Then, to Penny's joy, the branches parted. Grinning sheepishly, Tony shuffled out.

"You call-a me?" he grinned.

"Oh, Tony!" Penny seized his arm and held fast. "We've practically torn out the lining of our lungs, trying to find you! Come on! You're going back with us!"

"Not to Immigration mens!"

"Oh, don't worry about that now, Tony! My father has a little influence and he'll help you all he can. Besides, you're almost certain to win a portion of the reward offered for Danny Deevers' capture."

"Money no good if they send-a me back to Italy!" Tony said stubbornly. "Want-a stay in America. I work-a hard. Go to school!"

"I think perhaps it can be arranged," Penny prom-

ised recklessly. With Salt's help, she kept steering the boy toward the boat. "After all you've done tonight, Immigration authorities couldn't be hard-hearted enough to refuse you citizenship."

Tony allowed himself to be persuaded and entered a boat with Penny and other members of the party. After a long and tiring but uneventful trip through the swamp, the Hawkins' farm finally was reached.

At the farmhouse, Mrs. Hawkins and her husband were being held prisoners by other policemen. Also waiting were the Widow Jones and Trapper Joe Scoville, whom she had summoned.

"Praises be! The police got to ye in time!" the widow exclaimed, giving Penny's hand an affectionate squeeze. "If harm had befallen ye this night, I never would have fergiven myself fer having taken ye into the swamp."

"Maybe what happened'll teach ye a lesson, but I got m' doubts," interposed the old trapper with a chuckle. "Wimmin is mighty stubborn critters!"

As Mrs. Hawkins and her husband were led out of the house, the woman caught sight of her two sons handcuffed to officers. "Hod! Coon!" she screamed hysterically.

She tried to break away from the policemen who held her, and would have attacked Danny Deevers had they not restrained her.

"Ye'r the one who got us into this mess!" she ac-

cused the convict. "I hope they lock ye up fer the rest o' y'er life!"

Much later, after all the prisoners had been confined in Riverview jail, Mr. Parker and Penny obtained custody of Tony. Arrangements were made so that the lad might remain in the Parker home while Immigration officials considered his case.

The Italian boy proved to be a perfect guest. Not only did he help about the house and yard, but he never overlooked an opportunity to improve his education. Many a time Penny or her father came upon him in the library, reading a book.

"If he doesn't get to stay, it will be a crime!" the girl declared. "Oh, why doesn't the Immigration department reach a decision?"

Despite Penny's fretting, weeks dragged on and still Tony's case hung fire. Many telegrams went back and forth between Riverview and Washington, D. C. So involved did the affair become that even Mr. Parker began to lose hope the boy could be kept in America.

But at last word came that the last bit of red tape had been cut. A high immigration official had ruled that although it was irregular, Tony might remain in Riverview, providing someone would guarantee his support.

Mr. Parker willingly signed the necessary papers. A job next was in order, but this Penny easily arranged through Mark Fiello, the hamburger shop man.

As for Danny Deevers, the convict promptly was returned to prison, and the stolen $50,000 turned over to the Third Federal Bank.

In due time, Ezekiel, Coon, Hod and Mrs. Hawkins were convicted on charges of harboring a fugitive from justice. At their trial, evidence also was introduced, showing they had operated a still illegally.

For many days the *Riverview Star* carried front page stories of the happenings. Penny wrote several of the articles, while others carried Jerry's byline.

"The best part of all is that with Danny behind bars, you'll no longer be in danger," the girl remarked one day to the reporter. "He really was out to get you."

"I suppose so," Jerry agreed, "but I never was much worried. Danny's real motive in coming back to Riverview was to recover the hidden $50,000. Running into me—and particularly you—proved his undoing."

In days that followed, Penny drove many times to the swamp to see Mrs. Jones and Trapper Joe. Both rejoiced that Danny Deevers and the Hawkins' family could cause no more trouble.

One afternoon as the girl paid the widow a long call, they fell to talking over their swamp experiences.

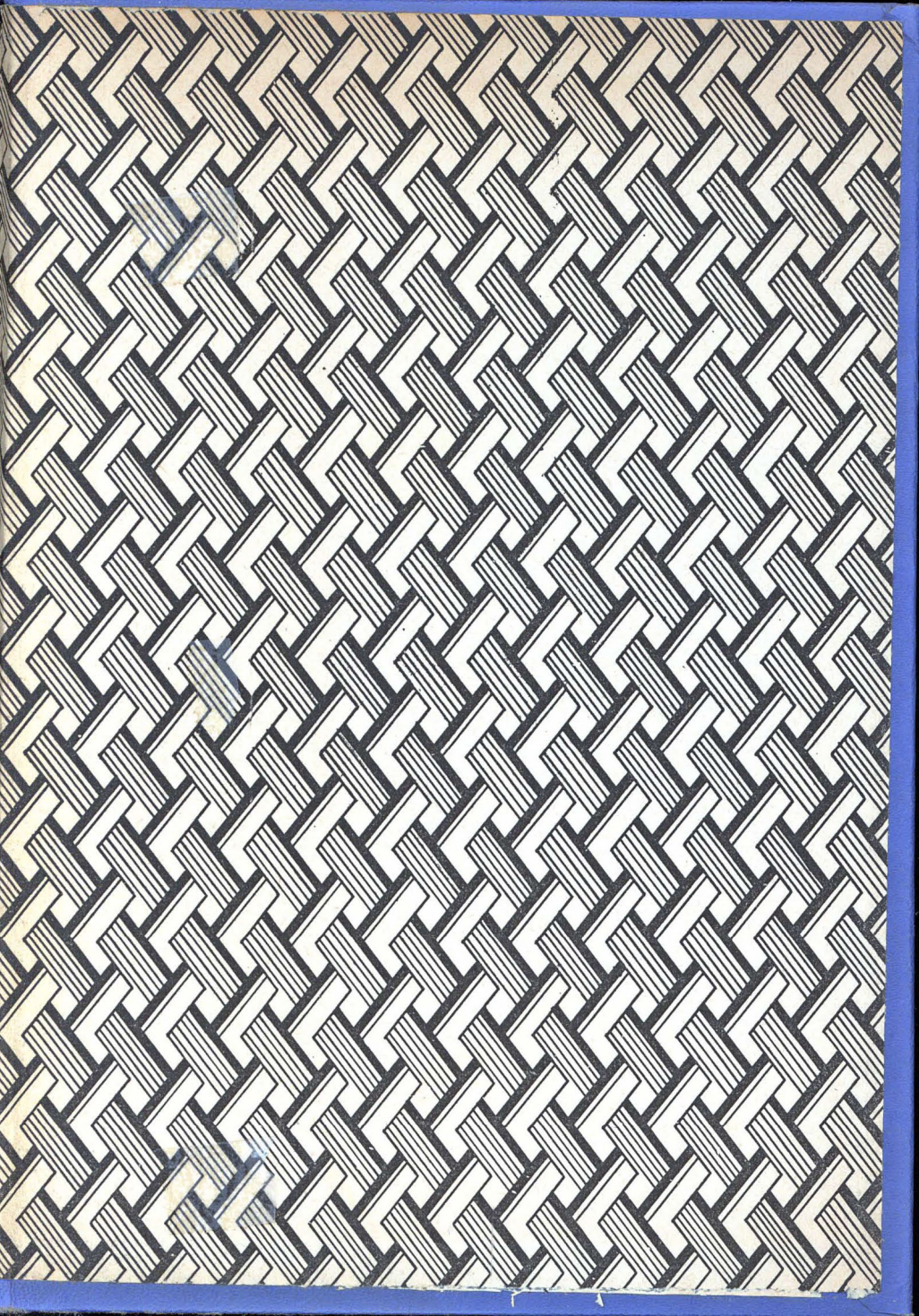
"It was mighty excitin' out there—you and me in the boat," Mrs. Jones recalled. "Now that it's all over, I hain't ashamed to say I was plenty skeered we'd never git out o' the swamp alive."

"So was I," grinned Penny.

"Revenooers was in yesterday to smash up Ezekiel's still."

"They were!"

"Yep, and they got track o' that trucker who was in so thick with the Hawkins boys." The widow sighed and pulled aside a kitchen curtain to gaze thoughtfully toward the swamp. "Well, I reckon the last bit o' evil's been driv' away from Black Island. From now on, the land'll jest lie there and belong to the wind and the rain."

"And to us," Penny added softly.

The widow nodded as her gaze lingered long on the fringe of towering pines. "One o' these days, when the spirit moves us, we'll go back there," she promised. "The swamp always belongs to them that loves it!"